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Fantasy's weight: A tale of Zaria DeKarthan

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Fantasy's Weight: A Tale of Zaria DeKarthan

(TITLE)

BY

Heather Wohltman

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Critical Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut says in his novel, *Player Piano*, “I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can’t see from the center” (84). Laurence Yep, Marie Colleen Cruz, and Kate B. Pollock all argue that fantasy stands as an important vehicle of learning for those who cannot understand reality without taking a step out of it. George Slusser asserts that the “concept of ‘reality’ [needs] a firm sense of non-reality (or fantasy) in order to define itself as a distinct entity” (24). This assertion lends credence to the idea that fantasy is necessary, if for nothing else, to define the parameters of reality. This puts fantasy in an interesting position of existing as an unrealistic or improbable supposition, but at the same time, an intrinsic part in understanding our own reality. When used in literature, good fantasy can create a duality of what Roland Barthes calls “readerly” and “writerly” text (x). A readerly text is one in which the reader is a passive observer following a set meaning, whereas the writerly text invites a reader to join in the creation of the text by interpreting meaning from a non-traditional storyline. However, these two concepts of text are intrinsically linked because, like reality and fantasy, one cannot exist without the other. A readerly text only becomes readerly, having the ability to bring readers back to the text for the sheer enjoyment of reading the novel, by first being a writerly text, a text that allows a reader to think and contemplate an idea or moral. Fantasy accomplishes this duality of readerly and writerly, according to John Dean, by being a “form of literature in which the imagination is most liberated, in which astonishment outruns reason and the reader is invited both to play truant from the everyday world and to be refreshed by wonder” (149). The fantasy genre allows readers to have a liberated sense of escape from

the everyday world, yet, it is this liberated imagination that opens the reader to the possibility of discovering something new. This deceptive idleness or enjoyment allows for fantasy to be an ideal vehicle for the issues of reality that hit too close to home. With this in mind, I strive to utilize the fantasy genre in my creative thesis in order to showcase the psychological issue of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in my main character, Zaria DeKarthan and the sociological issue of slavery in the realms of my fantasy world. One of the main elements of fantasy that I employ in my work is the use of a parallel universe, which is to say, a universe or world that is different from our own universe/world. The placement of the story into a world different than our own brings with it the ability to put PTSD and slavery in sharper clarity because of its foreign surroundings. Placed in a setting where most aspects are improbable and unrealistic, issues of reality can become more pronounced and central to the story being told without overwhelming the reader with reminders of real world problems. They are invited to “play truant” from reality, yet they are experiencing that reality through the characters and stories of the fantasy nonetheless.

The narrative of my creative thesis, *A Tale of Zaria DeKarthan*, follows the main character, a half-metal spirit half-human woman, Zaria DeKarthan, and her struggle with PTSD due to her past as a slave. Zaria is now free of her master and has become a semi-successful shipper captain, a realm traversing occupation that requires the use of a ship and the ability to cross the portals that separate realms. However, since slavery is an accepted norm in her world, she has to be ever vigilant of the risk of recapture. This stress and the remembrance of all that she lost as a slave, most importantly her sister, results in the onset of PTSD. The setting of the narrative is couched in the fantasy genre

through varying realms and species, a narrative choice that accentuates the psychological and sociological issues of PTSD and slavery.

Maria Colleen Cruz and Kate B. Pollock find that “good fantasy has, underneath it, an idea with weight” (185). They argue that through the rich material of the fantasy genre, the reader is free to explore such topics as “self-discovery, alienation, ethics, and the environment” (185). This “weight” is what keeps the story grounded in reality while every other aspect remains foreign. In my own work, PTSD and the acceptance of slavery are the “ideas with weight.” PTSD, the misfiring of the “fight-or-flight” instinct that everyone is born with, affects Zaria DeKarthan due to her forced enslavement at a young age. The traumas she suffered while under a tyrannical rule ripple into her current life as a captain and affect the decisions she makes as the story unfolds.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, “people who have PTSD may feel stressed or frightened even when they’re no longer in danger. [This] develops after a terrifying ordeal that involved physical harm or the threat of physical harm” (“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”). However, not everyone with PTSD has been through a dangerous event. Some people get PTSD after a friend or family member experiences danger or is harmed. The issue of PTSD is present in this day and age because of the frequency of its inception. The disorder “affects 7.7 million American adults” and can present itself at any age (“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”). It has also gained public attention in relation to war veterans, but its causes can emerge from a variety of traumatic incidents, such as “mugging, rape, torture, being kidnapped or held captive, child abuse, car accidents, train wrecks, plane crashes, bombings, or natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes” (“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”). With the occurrence of recent traumatic

events such as 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the Sandy Hook school shooting, PTSD remains a topic of much interest and relevance to the U.S. population.

In my narrative, it was not only the physical harm done to Zaria when she was a slave that caused her PTSD, but also the threat of physical harm to her sister. This threat to her sister resulted in Zaria now having unjustified reactions of violence whenever she or her crew, whom she considers her surrogate family, are, in her mind, threatened. M. J. Larrabee, S. Weine, and P. Woolcott state “the arrival of trauma [...] undercuts the usual, slashes unspoken assumptions to shreds, and attacks the very meaning of one's life, even as the trauma experiencer sometimes continues the motions of everyday existence” (354). Unspoken assumptions in life can be anything from ‘children should be loved and sheltered’ to ‘the good guys always win.’ It is the breaking of these assumptions through a trauma that can bring about a form of PTSD that can have lasting effects. No longer can the assumptions continue, and the world has become, in the mind of the trauma experiencer, a more dangerous place. Taking this new and dangerous world into account, the difficulty of moving on with life after a trauma does influence the progression of Zaria’s PTSD. The disorder manages to keep people, and in this case characters, from being able to move on. They are stuck in this moment of trauma and cannot escape it. The “fight-or-flight” instinct malfunctions and the character continues to feel the fear of her past experiences despite having escaped them. This, in turn, affects many of Zaria’s decisions throughout the course of the novel and creates more problems for the other characters and their goals. This stuck feeling is the basis for character growth in the narrative because Zaria, through the journey that she is forced to go on due to decisions

she has made, is subjected to forms of exposure therapy, cognitive reconstructing and stress inoculation training, all treatments for PTSD (“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”).

The other “idea with weight” that is found within the narrative is the issue of slavery. In this age of post-slavery, it is almost universally understood that slavery is inherently inhumane. This understanding, generations removed, comes with a sense of guilt on the part of those who were the slavers and indignation for those who were the slaves. Even generations removed, the effects of slavery can still be seen in racism, discrimination and white-guilt. Another form of slavery that isn’t as often acknowledged is human trafficking. According to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) website, “it is estimated that 800,000 men, women and children are trafficked around the world each year” (“Human Trafficking”). The victims of human trafficking are often taken from their homes with the promises of a better life in a different country. However, when they arrive they are forced into “the commercial sex trade” through prostitution and “forced-labor situations” such as “domestic servitude, farm or factory labor” (“Human Trafficking”). ICE states that “surprisingly, many people are unaware that this form of modern-day slavery occurs every day in the United States” and that “the greatest challenge in combating human trafficking is victim identification” (“Human Trafficking”). These differing views on slavery as both a thing of the past and an ignored present problem are intriguing contradictions. Using both of these acknowledged forms of slavery, *A Tale of Zaria DeKarthan* has within it fantasy realms that allow free and open owning, purchasing and trading of slaves. While not all races and realms participate in the slave market, there is no universal realm law that prohibits or condemns slavery of any form. Because slavery is a normative venture, the only characters who are truly

concerned or affected by the existence of slavery are those who have a personal connection with the issue: the slaves themselves and any character that has a link to a current or former slave, be that a friendly or a familial link. The idea slavery being an accepted norm in the novel comes from the ignored aspect of human trafficking. Some realms do not allow slavery within their borders, but do nothing in which to put an end to the venture as a whole. In this way, it reflects the acknowledged yet unacknowledged aspect of slavery in today's society.

Fantasy is, in my opinion, the perfect vehicle of conveyance for the issues of slavery and PTSD because the reader does not pick up the novel in order to read about these issues. When a reader picks up a copy of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, they are expecting the consequences of PTSD to show in characters due to the familiar surroundings of the 9/11 attack. Kurt Vonnegut displays an intriguing look at PTSD in his science fiction novel *Slaughterhouse Five*. His main character, Billy Pilgrim showcases his PTSD through the disjointed narration of the novel and his trauma at Dresden. However, Vonnegut's portrayal of PTSD is initially less obvious due to the unique way in which he conveys Billy's symptoms through time slips and alien abductions. This brings about what Philip K. Dick calls a conceptual dislocation that affects the reader and forces them to view the issue from a new angle. In the same way, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* includes a form of PTSD that is less pronounced, yet shown in a subtle way through Frodo's burden of the one ring. Because of the ring's damaging effects and manipulations, Frodo is traumatized throughout his journey to Mount Doom and while the journey ends, his suffering does not. Fantasy and science fiction are almost impossible to separate as genre classes, but the one thing that holds true

of both genres is the conceptual dislocation that allows a reader to see something new and feel joy in their discovery. This hearkens back to Barthes idea of a readerly and a writerly text because a good fantasy, according to Philip K. Dick, starts as “a collaboration between author and reader, in which both create” and “enjoy” that creation before becoming that text that a reader can go back to whenever they feel like reading (Dick 77).

In keeping with the craft of fantasy, *A Tale of Zaria DeKarthan*, implements the fantasy element of a parallel universe as the setting. A parallel universe is a common aspect found in both science fiction and fantasy novels. There are varying degrees of parallel universes, but it is most commonly seen as a self-contained separate reality coexisting with our own. The degrees come from the relative closeness of the parallel universe, whether it is a small geographical region or an entire new universe. A parallel universe can be seen in the epic fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* books, where the creatures and staples of Middle Earth are vastly different from our own reality. In Middle Earth, elves, dwarves, hobbits, wizards and dragons are all characters within the narrative. The universe of Tolkien’s world differs from the known reality of our world. The parallel universe is a way in which to dislocate the reader from the known precepts of our own world.

While looking at the canonical fantasy of Tolkien, I focused most of my research of the fantasy genre in the contemporary field of literature. I began reading *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling fantasy authors Ilona Andrews, Jennifer L. Armentrout, Patricia Briggs, Jennifer Estep, Sherrilyn Kenyon, Seanan McGuire, Michelle Sagara and Eileen Wilks. Being popular fantasy authors, their stories are consumed for the most part

because of their entertainment value; however, their fantasy stories still contained within them an “idea with weight.”

With canonical literature of the science fiction genre, it is understood that in *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut focuses on the consequences of war and in *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury focuses on the idea of censorship and its effects on a future version of our world. In the contemporary pieces, these “ideas with weight” can also be found. In *Magic Bites*, Ilona Andrews examines the idea of the pursuit of dominance through power. In *Tempting Danger*, Eileen Wilks looks at the segregation of races and the unfounded hatred that this segregation is founded on. In *Born of Night*, Sherrilyn Kenyon shows the abuse of power and its effects on the people who are beneath that rule. In *Cast in Shadow*, Michelle Sagara focuses on the poverty and crime in the fiefs complacently allowed by the ruling family and its government. These are just four of the works of fantasy that show issues with weight that are significant to the world today. These contemporary texts still adhere to the pretexts of Barthes ideas on a “readerly” and a “writerly” text by invoking the ideas with weight that cause a reader to think in a new way or contemplate anew something that was already known. Placing these issues of weight in the frame of a fantasy gives the novels a chance to entice readers with a truly enjoyable read, yet at the same time, convey the ideas with weight that are so intrinsic to the story being told.

Strategies for Integrating Backstory

In her novels, *Acheron* (2008) and *Styx* (2013), Sherrilyn Kenyon uses the strategy of a chronological story. Her main characters, twin brothers Acheron and Styx,

had such horrible childhoods that to understand the problems they face as adults, the reader must first know the reasoning and circumstances of their attitudes and paranoia. Presenting the trauma as it happened and what led up to that point works as a way for the reader to become more involved with the character's struggles and is a strategy that abolishes the need for any backstory by focusing on the progression of a main character.

A strategy often implemented in sharing backstory is the use of a prologue to introduce immediately the issues facing the protagonist. Sherrilyn Kenyon and Seanan McGuire both apply this strategy in their novels *Born of Night* and *Rosemary and Rue*. Kenyon presents her main characters pivotal moment of change, where he leaves the corrupt universal policing force, The League, and becomes a wanted fugitive. In a similar manner, McGuire uses the prologue to share how her main character, October Daye, was turned into a fish for fourteen years. Both of these author's prologues provide a key piece of backstory that deeply impacts the telling of the rest of the story. However, they do not reveal the full backstory in these prologues--they stand as more of a means to familiarize the reader with the characters and their current states of mind.

Another technique for inserting backstory is the placement of a character or of a reminder that will inspire a flashback or remembrance in the main character, while never leaving the current story. In Eileen Wilks's *Tempting Danger*, the main character in that novel, Lily Yu, has a defining characteristic of being a detective. Lily's choice to become a detective came from when she and her best friend, Sarah Harris, were abducted at the age of seven by a rapist. Sarah was used and killed in front of Lily, but the police were able to rescue Lily before it was her turn (219-22). This is a key moment in Lily's backstory that is hinted at from chapter two, page twenty, yet the full story isn't revealed

until chapter twenty-two, page 219. Wilks utilizes a single character, Ginger Harris the sister of Sarah, related to the events of Lily's past and present in the current story line, to draw hints about the happenings of the past for almost two hundred pages.

In the same way, Michelle Sagara uses this strategy when she introduces the mystery behind her main character, Kaylin Neya, by having Kaylin attack Severn when he first appears. The reader, along with the other characters in the room, is completely ignorant of the past that the two characters share. Severn continues to bring out the hints of what must have occurred between himself and Kaylin, just as Wilks uses Ginger to bring out Lily's backstory. However, Sagara complicates her revelation of Kaylin's backstory more than Wilks did with Lily's revelation by having the story Kaylin reveals at the end of chapter eleven be just Kaylin's point of view on Severn and Kaylin's past. The reader finds out later in the novel that Severn knows more of what happened and why Kaylin doesn't know.

In *Spider's Bite*, Jennifer Estep's main character, Gin Blanco, is constantly reminded of the night her family was murdered. This reminder comes from the spider runes that had been branded into both palms with liquid metal on the same night her family died. Many times throughout the book, Gin looks at the runes and it dredges up memories of that night and its consequences. In this way, the reader is almost fully informed through Gin's own contemplation of the night and not dialogue between two or more characters.

These forms of remembrance often display themselves in one of two ways: as either a line or two that hints at a deeper importance of an utterance, or in actual flashbacks. While both Andrews and Estep manage to integrate these short flashbacks

into the narrative being told, there is also risk inherent in the use of flashbacks. Not properly placed, a flashback can disrupt the flow of the novel or provide information the reader is not yet able to appreciate. The key design for using a flashback seems to be the size of the flashback being used in relation to the stories. Several novels I have read implement the flashback technique, yet have large chunks of flashback that, while necessary to the story being told, happen too quickly and take the reader away from the novel's story, disorienting them when they are reintroduced to the current plot line.

These strategies for integrating backstory all have merit. In *A Tale of Zaria DeKarthan*, Zaria's backstory is integral to the way she handles herself in the present plot line and why she suffers from PTSD; however, there is no key moment that the audience needs to know to understand Zaria from the opening chapter and without this moment a prologue is unnecessary. Because of the backstory's importance, hints were dropped through the use of a secondary character in the same way that Wilks and Sagara had done. The use of hints allows for the reader to get a sense of the trauma that Zaria suffered without giving away the full story at the beginning. This hooks the reader and also provides an excellent way to showcase PTSD symptoms since re-experiencing symptoms are a sign of PTSD. With this desire to utilize the integration of backstory as a symptom of PTSD, a physical reminder of the past, the way Estep uses for her main character, Gin Blanco, was placed for Zaria in the form of a metal bracer. The bracer reminds her of the sister who shared in her slavery and also works as another point of her PTSD symptom signs. While flashbacks are utilized in the narrative, they are kept to a brief minimum and never longer than a paragraph in length.

Strategies for World-Building

The Fantasy genre provides a world that is specific to the story being told. Beyond the character relations and backstory, world-building is a key step in the production of a fantasy genre novel. However, the difficulty of world-building is that the author has to define this world, which can lead to extraordinarily long passages of exposition. Long exposition takes the reader out of the story just as quickly as a poorly placed flashback. The author knows and understands their world, but has to convey that world without falling into the pit of exposition. My fantasy world is a melding of many different realms through the use of portals to gain access to each new realm. To understand this concept, the use of exposition seemed almost a necessity. Unfortunately, exposition can create a very choppy story with blocks of information that halt the plot in order to explain an aspect of the fantasy world. The remedy for this seems to be the author relying on the reader to 'go with them' far enough into the story that the explanations become unnecessary. There are several strategies to accomplish this, however.

In *Geist*, Philippa Ballantine immediately introduces her world through her main character's musings of a riot taking place and the people's reasons for the riot. Unfortunately, the fantasy elements are introduced without much of an introduction or any real description. The reader is introduced to the fantasy terms, such as geist, Deacon Gauntlets and Runes of Dominion, as they become relevant to the action taking place. While this works by showing and not telling, it also brings with it a problem of completely alienating the reader. Trusting that the terms will eventually reason themselves out through further use in the story, the reader must be willing to suspend

disbelief and go with the world that they are so suddenly forced into. Kelly Gay also uses this method of introduction without explanation in her novel *The Better Part of Darkness*. However, her fantasy world also coexists in our own world. So, while the reader is bombarded with new terms and world aspects, they are also still surrounded by the familiar through places and things that we have in this world.

Another way to introduce the new world is to present an ignorant character who has to learn the world alongside the reader. McGuire uses this in *Rosemary and Rue* with her character October Daye, who does have some basic knowledge of the creatures and politics of the Sidhe realm she is a part of, but with her fourteen years away, she is not up to date on every aspect of her world, and the exposition at some points can be forgiven as she tries to remember what relations between certain castes were like in the past versus now. The ignorant character can provide a great way for the author to convey the world and the problems that come with it to the reader. Yet, I found that it also has the drawback of being a technique that is almost overused in this genre. The main character must be able to hold the reader's attention, but ignorance is not an ingratiating trait.

Ilona Andrews manages to solve this conundrum in the novel, *Bayou Moon*, by having two main characters, one of whom is new to the setting of the novel yet not the world itself. William is new to the Mire, yet not the Edge, the world in which the Mire exists. He is accompanied by Cerise, who grew up in the Mire and is able to teach William of the dangers and its useful aspects. In this way Andrews provides the ignorant character, but does not make him completely ignorant to the world.

Since *A Tale of Zaria DeKarthan* is set in just as strange a world as Ballantine's, I tried to find a way to utilize her method of trusting the reader to go with the story despite

the bombardment of new information, while also defining my world through the use of an ignorant character. The answer came in creating a secondary character that did not have as much experience with this world as Zaria had. Therefore, Zaria was forced to explain a few of the details in a way that avoided exposition and favored short explanatory dialogue. In this way, exposition on the technical and theoretical uses of portal travel could be cut from the first twenty pages and instead explained through actually having characters traverse the portals.

Vonnegut's idea of being able to view the world better from the edge resonates with what the fantasy genre can accomplish. Fantasy can present a world far different from our own and, because of its difference, a safe place to observe the ideas with weight. This state of disassociation allows for readers to enjoy the story being told and still view issues that lie underneath the wonder of the fantasy elements. Utilizing the techniques learned from contemporary and canonical texts, *A Tale of Zaria DeKarthan* makes use of the fantasy genre and its ability to provide a liberated imagination for the reader, a state in which these "ideas with weight" are most easily accessible.

A Tale of Zaria DeKarthan

Heather Wohltman

Chapter One

Zaria watched nervously as Jaden climbed into the fighting ring at the Fengolian weigh station, following a seven-foot-three-inch tall Fengolian already cracking the three knuckles on his top right fist. The Fengolian was looking far more intimidating than Zaria had initially thought when setting up the bet with the Fengolian's captain. She grimaced as she heard the roar of approval from the other shippers in the crowd as the Fengolian lifted his three arms into the air, already confident in his victory. She had to hand it to Krigg, the bastard only hired the best to work in his crew, and this Fengolian could rival any other of his species in physical prowess.

When Krigg had boasted of his newest client and the amount of money the civilian was paying to be ferried between realms, Zaria had done what any good shipper who was bleeding money and desperate for a job would do. She bet her second in command against Krigg's for the right to the client.

Fights for jobs were a common occurrence at shipper weigh stations. It was the reason that a fighting ring was always situated off the main building in a room large enough to hold several shipper crews and the betting pits. The ring consisted of rough rope and metal poles, cordoning off a ring set on the same scuffed metal floor as the rest of the facility. There was no seating available at the fights- too easy to convert a seat into a weapon. While the fights didn't have many rules, the weigh stations did enforce a strict no-killing rule. Deaths due to the fights would garner too much attention from the Guardians, an organization set up to police realm passage and be a thorn in the side of every shipper.

“You sure you want to go through with this, DeKarthan? I’m always open to an alternate payment source,” Krigg said. He slid into the empty spot on Zaria’s right near the edge of the ring. He was humanoid in shape alone. The fleshy tentacles that adorned all Strendle faces searched around for purchase on Zaria’s skin. She had been trapped in a room with a Strendle when she was younger, and the memories were still enough to keep her up at nights. Her aversion to the species was well known among the shippers and Krigg and the other Strendles took any and all opportunities to mess with her head.

She didn’t appreciate Krigg’s attempts at unnerving her, but she also knew the importance of keeping up appearances in a shipper weigh station. If she showed fear here, she could kiss any future clients goodbye. Who wanted to hire a crew that backed away from a challenge?

So, she stifled her immediate response of violence and stood stiffly while Krigg’s tentacles swayed all around her, yet never touching.

Leaning unnecessarily close to her ear, Krigg continued to talk. “I know how fond you are of your crew. It would be a shame to have to cripple your pretty pilot.”

Zaria looked over at Jaden as he jumped in the middle of the ring, ignoring the Fengolian who continued to pace the ring and call to the crowd. She tried to see what Krigg and the other shippers must see as they looked at Jaden. He barely reached the shoulder of the Fengolian; his pale lanky build and sinewy muscle a poor showing next to the Fengolian’s massive grey physique.

“Krigg, you should learn not to make foolish bets.” The metal snake bracer around her wrist flowed into the form of a dagger as Zaria gripped the hilt and pressed it to Krigg’s throat in one continuous fluid movement. “Come any closer and I’ll demonstrate what that alternate payment source would truly be.”

She pressed the dagger in just enough to emphasize her point, but not draw blood. Krigg was less than impressed, but he did move slightly further away from Zaria.

His tentacles stopped their calculated roaming and came to rest around his shoulders like a gaudy scarf.

“You never fail to disappoint, DeKarthan.” Krigg watched as the dagger reformed into a snake bracer around Zaria’s wrist before he continued. “However, this bet was anything but foolish. Walt is the best fighter I have and your pilot doesn’t stand a chance. How are you going to keep your ship after I take what’s left of your meager funds?”

“That’s sweet of you to be concerned, but maybe you should pay more attention to the fight you’re so sure you’ve already won.”

Zaria watched as the Fengolian, Walt, smashed all three of his arms down on a spot that Jaden had just vacated. She winced as the metal floor of the ring dented from the force of the hit. As Walt lifted up and swung around, Jaden moved behind him and hit below Walt’s single left arm, going for the tender flesh and the vulnerable organs beneath it. Walt curled in on himself and pivoted to give what should have been a fatal head butt to Jaden’s mid-section. But Jaden made up for his lack of bulk by being quick. He narrowly missed being gored by the five horns that adorned the crown of Walt’s

head. Unfortunately, Walt brought his arms up at the same instant and caught Jaden around the waist, bringing him to the floor of the ring hard.

"I'm gonna smack him so hard across the head when he gets out of there," Zaria fumed quietly. "How many times have I told him to watch for the arms on a Fengolian? They're always moving. He has to break the elbows."

Jaden cursed in Bedixan, the language of his home realm, while he punched Walt in the ribs. Walt backed off enough for Jaden to spring to his feet. Walt recovered quickly and Jaden was forced to duck Walt's next two punches, before getting clipped by the third. While Jaden reeled, Walt got in another punch to Jaden's jaw.

"DeKarthan, is your man trying to lose or is this truly the best your crew has to offer?" Krigg sniffed. His tentacles rose in an agitated movement around his neck, a sign of his continued irritation from his brief encounter with her dagger.

"He just needs a few moments to warm up," Zaria answered.

"Amateur." Zaria wasn't surprised at the amount of snooty derision that Krigg was able to pack into that one word. Her crew may be so far in the red that they were resorting to gambling to gain employment, but at least she had some morals. Krigg was a low level noble in Strendlin. No title or place in the line of succession, but the money to buy himself an invitation to every noble event. He was damn proud of his standing and always striving to gain more. She often wondered why he bothered with the pretense of stopping at weigh stations when he made most of his money off the sale of slaves, which he transported through portal security without constraints. Any jobs to be

found at weigh stations were usually illegal in nature and always hazardous to one's health. But that was the life of a shipper. And Krigg didn't need to live it.

Slavery had only been outlawed in one realm, Ryndok. But even there, it wasn't because slavery was fundamentally wrong; no, the Ryndok were agoraphobic to the extreme, so, they closed their portals and placed a death penalty on any Ryndoki caught bringing in other species. The slave trade was a legitimate business and she knew from experience that not many people cared about the poor saps stupid enough to get caught by a trader. And having escaped from that life, she tried to put as much distance between herself and the trade as possible.

The bracer burned slightly on Zaria's wrist as the snake began to twist furiously around her hand and in between her fingers. It was a stress relieving trick she had learned when she was younger and since gaining her freedom she had had more and more reason to use it. She couldn't do much for any slave, and if the Guardians were ever to find the slave marks that adorned her and the twins, they would be going back to their owner. So, she stifled her desire to kill Krigg and pulled her focus back to the ring.

Jaden had just taken another hit to the jaw. Walt didn't hold back and sent his bottom right fist in to finish up what his top right fist had started. The roar of the other shippers in the crowd was reverberating from every corner of the large metal room. The sound reminded Zaria of the arena that her owner, Adarion, had owned back on Quillaxia. Reminded her of the heat of the two suns pounding on her back as she avoided blows from guards who were there to ensure the fight took place. The arena

was never the hard part of the slavery. Everything was straight forward. Kill or be killed. No thinking. She watched Jaden now and remembered his and his brother, Tern's, first fight in Adarion's arena. Identical twins, prisoners of war, had been a treat for Adarion's subjects. She remembered watching as the proud brothers, already injured from wounds during the battle, stood back to back and faced the ten guards who had won the right to execute them. Her place at Adarion's side gave her a great vantage point to watch the brothers take down those guards with a skilled ease, their elemental powers a sight to see.

Walt had stopped hitting Jaden long enough to pander to the crowd, assured of his victory. Jaden knew how to take a beating though and used the opportunity of Walt's inattention to take out his legs with a swift kick. Walt fell flat on his back, unprepared for the quick move. He tried swinging both of his right arms at Jaden, who was still on the ground next to him. Jaden caught the upper right arm between his own arm and side and blocked the lower right arm with his knee. Using his free hand he broke Walt's top right arm at the elbow and rolled to his feet. Walt let out a furious roar, saliva falling from his tusks. Jaden kicked Walt in the ribs beneath his left arm. Everyone in the crowd heard the crack and quieted to almost silence. Jaden knelt down over Walt and grabbed him by two of his horns. He lifted Walt's head and reintroduced it to the metal floor of the ring. The room erupted in boos as the crowd favorite passed out. The side betting would be great for anyone who had bet on Jaden to win, but by the sound of the crowd, that wouldn't be very many.

"I'll take the client's contact information now," Zaria said as she turned to face Krigg. He glared at her, tentacles agitated and whipping around, but barked the order to his lackeys before storming off. Zaria accepted the link, a digital chip that would be inserted into the ship's data board, with the client's information from Krigg's navigator and waited for Jaden to join her.

"That behemoth got in at least three extra hits on you. You should have had him down after his first clumsy punch," Zaria said

"I didn't want Krigg to get suspicious," Jaden said. He shrugged into his jacket and rubbed his jaw.

"The con was Krigg's ignorance about your fighting prowess. The bet had already been made before the fight started. You could have taken him down immediately and it wouldn't have stopped the payment of the bet."

"Where would the fun be in that? A longer fight, built up the drama." Entirely too proud of himself, Jaden swung his arm around Zaria's slim shoulders. "So, how much did I just make for us?"

Zaria looked across the ring at the only betting shipper happy about the outcome. "Why don't you ask Nike? She looks rather happy with your showing."

They all watched as the petite red-headed shipper came skipping up to them. She smiled brightly and held out the satchel full of coin credits, the only currency accepted universally, and therefore, what every shipper carried. "We should do this more often, Captain! Not a single person besides us bet on Jaden winning." She turned

to look Jaden in the eyes and whispered, "I'm sorry you look so wimpy, but it really worked in our favor."

Zaria burst out laughing as Jaden stared in shocked outrage at Nike.

Nike looked confused, "What did I say?"

Zaria rolled her eyes, "Come on." Guiding Nike to the hallway that would lead to the landing bay, Zaria grabbed the satchel and added the link with the client's contact information to their winnings. Jaden followed after them.

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Tern and Mal met them at the landing bay doors. Mal immediately scooped Nike into his arms, before addressing Zaria. "I hate this watching the ship shit. Especially when my mate is out and about getting into gods only know what sort of trouble." Nike hit Mal upside the head before he let her down.

"I may be just human, Mr. Big Bad Shifter, but I can take care of myself. I was doing it fine for the twenty-three years before you came around."

"How did we first meet again? Remind me. Who was the one tied up in the bed of a slaver truck on her way to the nearest auction?"

Nike slapped Mal on the shoulder. "The only time I've ever been captured, and you can't let me forget it. Who was the one pinned down by a group of Fengolians for stealing from their king? Who's the one who couldn't leave the landing bay because he's been banned from entering any Fengolian establishment?"

"She does have a point there, Mal," Jaden said. "I suggest bowing out gracefully before she can bring out that time with the female Milonese and the harem fiasco."

"Thanks for reminding her." Mal ducked Nike's punch

As Mal and Nike had their playful argument, Tern looked at his twin's face and the multitude of bruises that Walt had given him. "Why would you let that ham-fisted Fengolian land any punches?"

"You were not there; therefore you forfeit your right to comment." Jaden stalked off towards the ship.

"It's not my fault someone had to stay back to make sure Mal didn't storm the place,"

Tern shouted to Jaden's retreating back.

"Hey," Mal said. He stopped his argument with Nike to turn to Tern. "I'm not some rampaging beast with no sense of the severity of my situation."

"That actually describes you perfectly," Zaria said.

"Captain. You're supposed to be on my side." Mal clutched his heart and feigned hurt.

"We call it like we see it," Tern said.

"Honey, maybe you shouldn't try arguing this one?" Nike patted Mal's shoulder.

"Fine. I'll just take my rampaging self back to the ship then." With that, he stalked after Jaden.

The rest of the crew walked leisurely back towards their ship, passing several classes of Puddle Jumpers, the only means of traversing the portals between realms, on their way to the far corner of the port. Taking up the spot furthest from the weigh station doors, the ship was out of the way, but also in the best position to leave should

anything have gone sideways in the fights. They had learned years earlier that having an escape route from every weigh station and port was a necessity, not just a paranoid delusion. Most of the time, there was someone, or several someones, out to get them.

“Zaria, I got a request for a job while I was placing our bets.” Nike moved in to walk beside Zaria, Tern following behind them.

“What kind of job?”

“An acquisitions job. Some relic from the Ectasian High Councilor. Client says they’ll pay double our standard rate if we can get it to them within five days.”

“The client we just won needs to be ferried to Milona. Ectasia would be a realm outside our route,” Tern added.

“It’s just one extra jump though,” Nike pleaded. “We haven’t had a legitimate client in the past three months. All of our income has been from bets and selling parts from the ship. Can we really afford not to take this client?”

“No we can’t,” Zaria said. “But the money we’re making from this ferried client triples what we would make from even a doubled acquisitions job.” Zaria noted Nike’s crestfallen face, “We can, however, check with the ferried client and see if they are okay with a slight delay in their arrival time.” Nike was already jumping up and down before Zaria finished speaking.

“That’s not a definite yes, Nike.”

“It’s not a ‘no’ either,” Nike stated cheerfully before running to join Mal and Jaden as they boarded the ship.

“Doing two jobs at the same time will be tricky, especially with a law-abiding civilian tagging along.” Tern warned.

Zaria considered the options, “Nike wasn’t wrong about us needing to take legitimate jobs. We’ve gotten so far away from a steady client stream that we have to resort to bets. We let this one go, there may not be another one.”

“There are always going to be clients who want shippers to smuggle contraband and acquire items through less than legal means.”

“Yes, but every year there are more and more shippers. Our client base has virtually evaporated due to competing prices and these fights for clients remind us all too much of the arena.”

Tern stopped walking and placed his hand on Zaria’s shoulder, turning her to face him. “Jaden and I know what we’re doing when we walk into those rings. We volunteer for this. You’re not forcing us.”

Zaria looked into his eyes and knew he was telling the truth, but it didn’t stop the dark thoughts from surfacing. She had watched their fights in the arena, day after day as they refused to be killed. The master of the arena, Adarion, eventually decided they had won the right to join the ranks of his arena gladiators before he stopped the execution bouts. Her time in the arena had come before Tern and Jaden were captured and at a younger age, but she knew what it was like and she hated that she brought them back to those matches with the betting fights.

“I’m not being a very good Captain, either.” She shrugged off Tern’s hands, “I should be the one in those fights. I shouldn’t push this off on the two of you.”

“We all know why you can’t.”

The first time they had gone into a betting fight, she had been the one to go into the ring. Zaria didn’t remember that fight.

As soon as she had entered the ring, the crowd had started their cheering. The ring of cheering shippers had seemed just as impenetrable as the gates in the arena. The likeness bombarded her and she had been overwhelmed by her remembrance of the arena.

She had blacked out.

When she came to, she found that she had been banned from fighting at any shipper weigh station. The only person in the history of shippers to be banned from the fights.

Killing an opponent and his shipmate, who had jumped the ring to help him, would have been an execution sentence had anyone wanted to report it. She was lucky she had just been banned and that none of the shippers were too eager to go to the Guardians.

“A legitimate client is an opportunity that we can’t pass up. But I won’t let Jaden’s fight go to waste. We’ll give preference to that client.” Zaria, done with the conversation, left Tern to board the ship, her mind going back to sand, heat and the crowd’s cheers as she tried to push back the same memories that had caused the blackout.



## Chapter Two

Catching up with the other members of her crew, Zaria couldn't help but compare their standard G-class Puddle Jumper to the newer models taking up the small port. The G-class was older and pretty much phased out of production, but the side engine form always seemed a more pleasing design than the slick arrowhead shape of the newer classes to Zaria. Her ship had seen better days, the scars of past jobs gone wrong clearly visible despite the patchwork, yet it continued to run smoothly. The exterior was a mottled jumble of different metals that formed a sleek body longer than it was wide. Its cylindrical form was warped outward, coming to a snub nosed point at the head. The crew's insignia, a stylized outline of a dragon, wings spread and head thrown back, was stamped on the body of the ship midway between the nose and the engines on each side. The insignia matched the one on her jacket. The only part of the crew's clothing that was uniform.

Entering the ship through the loading bay, Zaria made her way to the bridge where Nike was already seated at the navigations console and Jaden in the pilot's chair, collaborating on a course for both potential clients. Mal had made a stop at the kitchen to get food and now sat next to Nike, eating what was left of dinner from the previous night. Tern followed Zaria onto the bridge, taking a seat near the weapons console. His tall frame reclined casually against the seat back, long legs crossed at the ankle and hands clasped behind his golden-haired head. His features were almost an exact replica of Jaden's, but for the braids that interspersed his hair.

Moving to stand near Nike, Zaria looked over her shoulder to view the planned route.

“Have you contacted the client who wants to be ferried to Milona?”

“Yes. He said that he would be waiting for us at the weigh station by the Gyulic portal,” Nike said, turning to address Zaria.

“Gyulic?”

“Yeah, I thought that was strange too. The Bedix portal would get him to Milona more directly than going through the Gyulic portal. We’ll have to go through the Ectasian realm to reach Milona if we leave through the Gyulic portal.”

“Did you warn him of this?” Tern asked.

“She told him that it would be out of the way to go through Gyulic and Ectasia when we could reach the same place by going through Bedix, and be closer to his drop off point to boot.” Mal talked around a mouthful of bivarc meat. Seeing as his inner animal needed far more calories than should be possible, Zaria didn’t feel the need to chastise him for his gross display of chewed bivarc.

“He told me he wanted to see a few different realms. This is apparently a part of his trip. He’s never been through the portals and while he has an excuse to leave this realm, he wants to see as many of them as possible.” Nike shrugged and returned to her task of charting a route.

“Remind me why we wanted this job?” Jaden asked. He had finished locking the coordinates in for the Gyulic portal weigh station.

“Money. Lots and lots of money,” Tern replied.

"I know ferry jobs are never enjoyable, but with the amount this client is paying us, we should be able to replace most of the patched pieces on the ship, and even have enough left over to feed ourselves." Zaria looked pointedly at Mal.

"Hey, I'm all for ferrying a client to whatever the hell realm he wants to go to. It's easy money and we can always abandon him in a different realm if he gets too annoying." He took another bite of the wing clutched in his hand. "It's really a win-win job."

"If we threw everyone off the ship that annoyed you, you would be all alone."

"I wouldn't throw Nike off." Mal stopped to think. "I'm rather fond of you too Captain. Now Jaden and Tern, I'll admit, would be gone pretty quick." He used what was left of the wing in his fist to deflect the knife Tern had thrown at him.

"What purpose do you serve on this ship again? I'm having trouble remembering why you're here beyond Nike's fascination with you."

"Species relations. I'm a people person."

Zaria shook her head at the antics of her crew. They were a motley bunch, but she loved every one of them. When she had escaped Adarion's rule with the help of Jaden and Tern, she never thought she would be able to start a life. Anything beyond what she was accustomed to at least. Even before she and her sister had been captured as fodder for the arena, her life had been hard. Being born half metal spirit to two full human parents had only ever brought her trouble. She took her time in the arena as penance for the crime of her birth.

But now, she had a family.

One in which she would do everything in her power to protect. She wouldn't fail again. The bracer around her wrist began its furious twisting dance around her hand as her thoughts turned to a darker matter.

"How long will it take us to get to the Gyulic portal weigh station?" She asked Jaden. She forced the metal around her wrist to stop its frantic movement. The concentration needed to do this ought to have warned her of how close she was to losing control of what little power she possessed, but she ignored it like she ignored most things that hinted at her instability.

"It will take us about three hours to get to the weigh station rendezvous." Jaden answered, busy throwing a knife back and forth with his brother, tempting fate and sweaty palms.

"I'm going to go to the engine room then and see if I can't convince the converter to give us more power for less fuel." Zaria left the bridge with mock salutes from Tern and Jaden and Mal and Nike's bickering following her out the door.

Taking the stairs down to the engine room located beneath the living quarters and mess hall, she spent an hour tinkering with the shoddy parts that comprised the ship's engine, using her powers to repair cracks and smooth out dents. Even with her powers, however, they were still going to need to replace over half the engine. Finally giving up, she went to her quarters-hoping a little shut eye would prepare her for meeting the client and the pandering that would come with it.

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Zaria was woefully mistaken about the benefits of sleep. She should have known that after the fights and memories they always drug up, sleep would offer her no reprieve.

The dream was the same one she had had for most of her life.

Her hands were bound to her cell wall with an energy cuff, the only secure method of binding a metal spirit.

She remembered the small space of the cell perfectly. The cold damp air that was as unforgiving in its continuance as the lions were when released in the arena. The lions she understood. Starvation was a friend she knew well and never begrudged the lions for their ferocity.

The pallet she sat on now was nothing more than a thin blanket tossed over wet straw, a twin to the one on the other side of the room. If she stretched out her foot, Zaria could just reach it.

Its occupant was a bedraggled mess. Her once beautiful golden brown locks now matted into a dull nest around her head. Teyla lay with her back to the wall. She wasn't bound to the wall the way Zaria was, the shackle around her neck the only sign of confinement. It broke Zaria's heart to see her once vibrant sister now resigned to her circumstances. Teyla had stopped eating what little food the guards would provide them and Zaria could see more of her bones than should be possible on a thirteen year old frame.

Zaria hated these dreams because she knew she could do nothing to alter the outcome of that day. Even as she sat bound as her older self-- no longer the child of

fifteen years, but the woman who had survived and escaped this hell hole-- she could do nothing.

She tried calling out for Teyla to look at her, to try and get free, already knowing the impossibility of that plea. But events were going to transpire the way they always did, despite Zaria's cries.

The door to the small cell jerked open in the dream, followed by the presence of four guards. They formed a half-circle around Zaria, completely ignoring Teyla. They were right in their concerns. Teyla wouldn't hurt anyone, even if she had been born with the powers that Zaria had. These guards had seen enough of Zaria and Teyla's arena bouts to know which sister was a threat.

Zaria started fighting against the cuffs in earnest as she watched Adarion enter the cell. Trying desperately to stop what was about to happen. She couldn't go through this again. She couldn't just sit and watch it happen.

She couldn't watch her sister die.

"Captain?"

Zaria jolted from the intercom buzz and turned to look at the small metal box on the wall by the door. The viewing screen was off for privacy, but she still knew it was Tern from the brashness in his voice.

She took a moment to orient herself in this place, a room she had lived in for the past eight years. She enjoyed the warmth the artificial air heater provided and the complete lack of dampness. She felt the soft mattress beneath her, a far cry from the pallet she had slept on in the cell.

Zaria took comfort in the here and now. Shaking off the cobwebs of her memories, she got out of bed and went to the intercom.

“What’s up, Tern?”

“We are arriving at the Gyulic portal weigh station. We figured you’d want to greet the client,” Tern answered.

“More like you all don’t want to do it.”

“There was that.”

Zaria shook her head and looked down at the bracer around her right wrist, happy for the chance to avoid the rest of her dream. The memory of that day would never leave her, but she could definitely do without the repetitive dream. “Okay, I’ll be up in five.” Zaria signed off and went to change, throwing on pants, a shirt, and her boots. She was just about to leave her room when she stubbed her foot on the edge of her bed. She slowed her hasty exit to curse at her own clumsiness and finally noticed what should have been glaringly obvious from the start.

Her bed frame and any other metal item in her room not a part of the walls had been warped. The corner she had stubbed her foot on was a warped leg stretching out and away from the center of the bed. The metal looked as if it had been in the process of fleeing, escaping the spot in which she had occupied.

She knew the strengths of her power well. She had been forced to use that power in every battle she had been forced to fight. And she couldn’t do what her room was showing her. She had to be physically touching a piece of metal to affect it. She

should know. She had tried many times to mold metal that wasn't touching her. No time as much as she had in that cell, on that day.

She tried again now to put her things back in order, but came up with the same result she always did. Nothing happened unless she was touching the metal.

Frustrated and confused, she left her room and headed to the bridge, hoping that if she just stopped thinking about it, everything would go back to normal.

### **Chapter Three**

As Zaria and Jaden exited the ship, she couldn't help but admire the beauty of this weigh station. It was so much more, in every sense of the word, than the weigh station at the Bedix portal. Where that weigh station had been large in size, it had lacked any sort of beauty. It had been as much of an amalgamation of metal as the ship her crew flew.

This weigh station, on the other hand, was a mass of shining metal, artfully formed into three tiers. The landing bay was at the top of one tier and the view from the ship was pretty spectacular. The tiers were stationed on a cliff overlooking the Red Oceans, the light from the two suns bouncing off the water in a dazzling array of magenta, orange, and blood red.

The tiers had been built by the ruling family of Fengolia as a bastion of welcome to all those that first entered their realm. The Gyulic portal had been the first to be found in the Fengolian realm, and before politics and fear had gotten in the way, it had been met with open curiosity and wonder.

"This place always creeps me out," Jaden said. He looked around with a grimace.



“It is a beautiful sight though,” Zaria said. They headed for the opening on the landing bay that would lead down and to the other tiers where the client waited.

“Yeah, but the beauty only covers up the ugliness that exists within.” He nodded to the tier furthest from them. “The entirety of that tier is off limits to shippers. Why do you think that is?” He continued before Zaria could tell him she had already heard this tirade from him and Tern enough times to have it memorized. “It’s where they keep the slaves. For every beautiful thing in this damn facility, you can bet your ass it was placed at the expense of a slave.”

Zaria knew the frustration Jaden felt. Having been a slave, the same as Jaden and Tern, she understood the anger Jaden had. But she also understood the futility of that anger. Being angry never helped. It was like begrudging the suns for shining or the tides for changing.

“Every weigh station and facility in the known realms is kept in working order by the backs of slaves. Why should this one be any different?” Zaria asked. They entered the elevator that would take them to the bridge levels, already knowing what his reply would be.

“The other places don’t pretend to be something they’re not. They don’t hide behind a mask of beauty.” Zaria let him continue to rant, no longer paying attention to the words. They stepped out of the elevator on the bridge level and walked across to the only tier they had access to.

Zaria and her crew had visited this weigh station enough times that she was able to avoid the crowd around the index map located at the end of the bridge on the far wall.

They headed instead to the stairs that spiraled all the way down the tier. The building was a large cylinder with an opening in the middle that showcased a truly amazing drop.

Zaria and Jaden went down the stairs three levels before heading down a long hallway that ended at the doors of a bar. Jaden, still ranting, but ever the gentleman, opened the door for Zaria, trusting that if there was trouble on the other side that Zaria could handle it.

The difference between the tiers and the bar it contained was immediately obvious upon entering. Where the tiers were all shining metal and towering heights, the bar was a squat room with hardly any light whatsoever. The only lights came from candles strategically placed on tables and the length of the bar and back counter to provide minimal light. It wasn't a crowded place, being far enough away from the center of the building to go unnoticed by most shippers and travelers.

Jaden stopped speaking as soon as they entered the bar. The familiarity of the atmosphere in the dirty bar was enough to get him to remain quiet.

Zaria spotted the only man out of place in the bar, sitting at a table near the counter and looking around nervously. He was just as tall as Jaden and Tern, coming in at around six and a half feet. His dark brown hair was covered by a wide brimmed hat. He wore a cloak, but it hung off his shoulders in a sloppy slant that was dangerously close to falling from him. His clothing beneath the cloak were of the business persuasion and pristine in their newness. Zaria wondered about the incongruity of his dirty old cloak and wide brimmed hat against the business attire he wore beneath, but decided that it really wasn't of concern to her. He was definitely out of place at the bar, which was frequented predominately by shippers, and because of it, Zaria pegged him for their client.

“Hello?” She said, taking a seat next to the man. He jumped slightly at her voice, spilling some of the untouched ale from the full glass clutched in his hands.

“Are you Zaria DeKarthan?” He asked.

“Yes, and this is my pilot and second-in-command, Jaden.” Jaden did nothing but stare at the man when Zaria pointed to him. The client nervously passed his gaze from Jaden’s stare to Zaria’s face, finally landing and staying on Zaria’s.

“You may call me Nolen Priznek. Nolen if you wish to be informal,” he said. The words didn’t match the cadence of his voice at all, like a child pretending to be grown before they understand the meanings of the words they speak.

“Well, Nolen, you talked with my navigator, Nike?” She waited for him to nod. “Then you know that this portal will take us on a more indirect route to Milona?” He nodded again. Zaria waited for him to say something more, but when the silence continued she gave up. “The fee you agreed to is reliant on the amount of time we are on this particular job. With the excursion through another realm, the price will have to increase by a fifth of the total.”

“I understand your hesitation, but I assure you I can pay the increased rate.”

“Since you are set on going this route, we do have a request of you.” Zaria paused as Nolen set his ale glass aside. “We have business in the Ectasian realm and if you wouldn’t mind a brief pause in that realm, we would be willing to drop the extra fee.”

“Absolutely!” Nolen replied, the first time his words and voice seemed to truly match. “I would love the opportunity to explore a bit of the Ectasian realm. I hear they have a growing plant that could cut bone. Isn’t that just fascinating?”

Since she had cut herself on that specific species of plant numerous times during different jobs, she didn't find it as fascinating as Nolen clearly did.

"Well, if you are okay with stopping in Ectasia, then all that is left is the down payment. We take half up front and the other half when we have gotten you to your destination."

Nolen had already pulled out his link to process the transaction before Zaria had finished speaking. "Done," he said.

Zaria looked to Jaden who held his own link in hand. She waited a few seconds before Jaden nodded, confirming that the money had been transferred.

"Alright, if you would follow us, we'll take you to the ship and get started on our journey."

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Zaria stood outside the ship and watched as Nolen walked around it, inspecting. She knew what her ship looked like. The Teyla wasn't much to look at, but Zaria and the rest of the crew took pride in her anyways. It had gotten them through many battles due to jobs going wrong.

"Does he have to look that disgusted?" Tern asked. He was already losing what little patience he had.

When Zaria and Jaden had led Nolen here, Tern and Mal had been waiting. Nike opted to stay on ship and prep for the portal jump. Nolen had wasted no time dropping his bags and inspecting the ship. Every so often he would toss out an insulting question on the Teyla's flying capabilities, a question that was always met with snarls from the men and a curt reply from Zaria.

"Can we re-vote on taking this job? I know after we first heard about it from Krigg we were pretty unanimous, but I'd like to switch my yea to a nay." Mal practically growled the words.

"I understand the sentiment, but you should have seen the amount of money he just deposited in our account." Jaden lifted up his link and handed it to Mal.

"Okay," Mal said after staring at the numbers for a full minute. "This buys him some time, but not a lot if he keeps insulting our ship."

"Best round him up then," Zaria said. After the words left her mouth, the men all moved to the ramp onto the ship. "Cowards!" she shouted at their retreating backs.

"Nolen," Zaria called. "Now that you've inspected the outside of my ship, would you care to board so that we may be on our way?"

"Of course." Nolen returned to Zaria's position and picked up his bags. He followed her up the ramp and into the ship.

"Could you be so kind as to give me a... tour?" he asked, looking around at the cavernous space of the ship's bay.

Zaria considered giving him the full tour, but decided against it when she thought about all the parts of the ship that Nolen could insult. She had more patience than the men of her crew, but not by much.

"This is the ship's bay, home to three single person fighters that are used on shorter voyages within realms. They can traverse the portals, but the ride would be bumpier and they don't hold much in the way of passengers or cargo." The pair bypassed the fighters and stopped in front of double doors. "These doors lead down to

the cargo hold located beneath the landing bay. The cargo hold and landing bay take up half the ship. The other half is engine room, living quarters, mess and bridge.” They continued on and exited the bay through doors at the far end. They passed through a long hall way and entered a wide open space occupied by a kitchen, dining and living room. “This is the mess hall slash entertainment room. Crew living quarters are above us and the rec room and engine rooms are beneath us.” She pointed to the door opposite the hall way they just traversed. “That door leads to the bridge.” She walked to the left and opened the door next to the hallway. “These are the guest quarters.”

She stood with the door open, hoping that Nolen would take the hint and enter, leaving Zaria the chance to abandon him to his temporary living quarters. He just stood there, however, staring at Zaria and waiting for her to make the next move.

“I have things I must do before we take off. If you would make yourself comfortable here, we should be through the portal soon.” When he still said nothing, Zaria let go of the door and left Nolen. He stood where she left him, not moving to enter the guest quarters or dropping his bags.

She put it out of her mind and made her way to the bridge. She found the rest of her crew already there and preparing to take off.

“How’s our passenger?” Nike asked. She was the only one of them that probably genuinely cared.

“He’s insulting and rude, but no physical harm has befallen him,” Zaria replied with her sweetest smile. All that got her was a grimace from Nike and a few chuckles from the rest of the ingrates.

"You really shouldn't be a tour guide, Zar." Nike shook her head and returned to her task. "So are we good to go then?"

"Yeah, I warned him that we would be taking off and that he could enjoy the ride from his quarters."

"An order he obviously took as a suggestion." Tern pointed to the doorway behind Zaria. She turned and found Nolen standing behind her.

"I'm sorry, but I've never been through a portal before and I wanted to get a good look at it while I have the chance." He went to stand near Nike, the obvious choice in this group of strangers. "Besides, after looking over your ship, I'm not positive it can make it through a portal."

Zaria held back her immediate comment and instead replied, "Well, then lets pray to the gods for a miracle."

"Yes, let's." Nolen took the seat next to Nike. There were four seats at the navigation and communications console and four seats near the weapons console. The Teyla wasn't like most of the ships in her class; she didn't have a captain's chair. The middle chair was for the pilot alone. Zaria joined Tern at the weapon's console and waited as Jaden went through the process of leaving the landing bay and moving the ship out over the Red Oceans.

"Where are we going?" Nolen had strapped himself in and was gripping the edge of the chair tightly.

“The portal is located a hundred feet below the surface of the Red Oceans. We’ll have to submerge before we make our way through,” Nike responded. She was clearly a better candidate to answer questions than anyone else.

“But the portal to Bedix is located a mile above the ground. I thought all portals were in the sky?”

“No. Portals can be located anywhere. It’s why the ships traversing them have to be capable of any terrain, be that the pressures of space or the depths of the oceans.”

“I’d heard rumors that certain creatures could maneuver through the portals without the enclosed metal trappings of a ship. It’s the human DNA, no matter how diluted, that makes the Puddle Jumpers necessary.” Nolen had turned to face Nike, directing his questions solely to her.

“Coz a being walking out of the portal and into space or a volcano wouldn’t be just as deadly.” Tern rolled his eyes at Nolen’s theories. They had all heard these as well, but took them as the theories they were, unsubstantiated nonsense that had no bearing on their lives. Not like they were going to try traversing the portals without a ship.

Nolen did his best to ignore Tern and addressed Nike again. “Then that is purely rumor?”

“Not necessarily. Those with the knowledge to pass through portals without a ship have all left these realms and not many have had the courage to test the theory itself. So, it remains a theory, neither proved nor disproved.”

“What do you mean when you say they left these realms? I thought all the portals had been found.”



"Oh, they've been found, but nobody has ever come back from a voyage through them," Mal, sitting on the other side of Nike, supplied.

"What do you mean?"

"The portals work as gateways that lead to specific realms and are constant to those realms," Zaria explained. "For example, from the Fengolian realm, the portals will always lead to the Gyulic, Bedix, and Jopa realms."

"And each realm has three portals for three possible realms. Those next realms would lead to two other realms and so on," Tern added.

Nolen had been nodding his head the whole time, but interjected here. "I know this. It isn't possible to go from our current position in Fengolia straight to Strendlin. We would first have to go through Bedix."

The complicated mapping of routes had caused Zaria more headaches than should be physically possible after she had escaped from Adarion and started as a shipper. The routes didn't consist of simply knowing where each portal would lead, but how to get to those portals within realms that were often in the midst of war. After eight years as a shipper, she knew most of the known routes and the dangers that lay on each, but even with the portals being explored by millions of species for hundreds of years, there were still a few that remained uncharted. It was these that Nolen didn't seem to realize existed.

"Submerging," Jaden warned. The jolt from the impact with the ocean was enough to stop conversation temporarily.

The Red Oceans were truly a sight to see beneath the water. The suns provided enough light to see the submerged facility in the distance that housed portal patrol, the facility that monitored all traffic through this portal. There would be a matching facility on the Gyulic side of the portal. The Guardians often made their homes in these facilities due to the frequent number of shippers and illegal shipments.

The waters were fairly calm, the occasional school of drimplough moving across their path. The large fish was common around this section of the Red Oceans and Zaria had often wondered how they knew to avoid the portal. The area around the portal was the only space in which there weren't any signs of sea life.

Nolen had been transfixed by the sights beneath the ocean, but he still wanted an answer to his previous question. "You say all the portals have been found. Then wouldn't have all the realms been discovered as well?"

"We know that from Jopa two of the portals lead to Quillaxia and Fengolia. The third portal does exist, but the realm it connects to is unknown. We do know that Ryndok also has a portal that leads to this same unknown realm," Zaria answered.

"But if Ryndok and Jopa both lead there, what is the third realm?"

"That does seem to be the question," Nike provided.

"There're more realms?" Nolen stared at Nike in horror of the thought.

Zaria found Nolen's questions and ignorance to be trying. How could he live in this age of realm travel and not know all these theories and facts? But as soon as the thought crossed her mind she remembered her own ignorance before becoming a slave. How she hadn't realized that other species existed and thought that her own powers

were completely unique in the world. She was right; she just didn't know that there were other worlds.

She shook off her feelings of irritation and waited as Jaden guided the ship to the portal.

The initial jolt was the worst part of going through the portal and the stabilizers made it feel more like a small ocean wave versus the tsunami it was closer to. If she hadn't known it was happening, Zaria wouldn't have even realized they were going through a portal.

"We should be through in nine minutes," Nike offered. Nolen seemed to be attempting to meld himself to the chair the way Zaria would two metal objects. He just numbly shook his head, unable to reply in any way.

The portal didn't last long and the ship came out amidst the marshes of the Gyulic realm at night. Nolen finally released his death grip on his chair before standing, his legs shaking so badly Zaria feared they wouldn't support his weight.

"I'm going to go to my quarters now. I think I might be ill."

"Do you want us to come get you before we go through the Ectasian portal?" Tern asked.

"No," Nolen immediately replied before composing himself and continuing. "I've seen one portal entry. I think that should be quite sufficient for my curiosity." The crew all watched as he made his way off the bridge, Mal, Tern and Jaden barely suppressing their laughter.

"I had forgotten how fun it is to watch a newbie during his first portal jump." Mal laughed as he addressed Tern.

"It definitely made his insults worth it," Tern admitted.

Zaria got up from her place next to Tern and walked to Nike's console.

"So what's the acquisitions job at the Ectasian High Councilor's place?"

"The man I was approached by wants us to retrieve this stolen artifact from the compound of High Councilor Fain Ke'Artia. The artifact is important to the succession of heirs in his family and he's willing to pay double our going rate to get it back."

Zaria stopped hearing anything Nike said after the High Councilor's name. "Fain Ke'Artia? Are you sure that's the name?" she questioned, her mind already spinning at the implications.

"Not like it's a hard name to forget, I mean-"

"Nike," Zaria snapped.

"Yeah, Fain Ke'Artia." Nike's face shifted with confusion as she looked at Zaria.

But Zaria couldn't stop her thoughts at the moment enough to be concerned about it.

Fain Ke'Artia.

The name instantly took Zaria back to Adarion's service. The meetings she would shadow Adarion in. The councils in which he would decide people's fates; enemies and allies alike. Fain had been at several of those meetings. A political player before he ever became this new High Councilor.

One of her jobs as Adarion's personal bodyguard had been to assess the threats that each business associate stood for. Fain had always been low risk and because of it a part of Adarion's inner circle. Fain's cruelty towards slaves was only rivaled by Adarion's.

He was a man Zaria was positive was in her past. A reminder of everything she had escaped from.

"Zar, do you know him?" Jaden asked. Zaria became aware of everyone watching her. She hadn't moved since Nike had confirmed the name.

"Yeah, I know him," she supplied. "And so do you."

Tern and Jaden looked at her like she was crazy and—at the moment—she just might be. She leaned over Nike and pulled up information about Fain Ke'Artia from the ships log. It contained an updated call sheet of every political member in the known realms. Pulling Ke'Artia's photo onto the main console screen, she stepped back and let Jaden and Tern get a good look at the man.

"That's..."

"Holy shit."

Jaden and Tern instantly recognized the man who had accompanied Adarion on many of his excursions to the arena. The arena was the only place that Jaden or Tern had ever seen Adarion or felt his harsh rule, but Fain had been a member of Adarion's retinue during each visit.

"I would have done this job for free." Tern's eyes burned with a fire that Zaria knew was all too real.

"No turning back now," Jaden added.

"Hold on a second," Nike cried. "I'm not getting something and being out of the loop isn't very fun."

"Ditto," Mal tossed in.

"This man is a member of our old master's inner circle." Zaria couldn't look at Fain's picture anymore, and blanked the screen. "We'll be doing this job happily. Anything that causes pain to this man."

"So," Mal started. "I guess you three will be going in for this job."

Their silence was answer enough.

Mal just shook his head. "Man, I would really love to be able to leave this damn ship once in a while."

## **Chapter Four**

The distant sound of a wolf howl spilled its way through the bay doors as the crew prepped for the job. They had passed through the Ectasian portal and covered the distance between the portal and the High Councilor's compound an hour before. Nike would be staying with the ship and running communications, Mal her ever-present, but begrudging, bodyguard. They were going through the links and checking their frequencies when Zaria left them on the bridge to meet Tern and Jaden in the bay.

There had been little debate on who would be going. Mal and Nike both argued that they were skilled fighters and useful people to have on a job. However, Nike's skill

set ran more towards the finer points of electronics and Mal never left his wife's side during a job.

Besides, she, Tern and Jaden had personal stakes in this job.

Tern and Jaden were born from a fire elemental mother and an air elemental father. Tern had inherited his mother's ability while Jaden had gotten their father's. The two elements complemented each other and when the two worked in synchronization their power was truly a sight to see. A sight that had been highly coveted at the arena.

The twins were standing next to the single seat fighters putting items in their bags that they would need for the mission. Tern was loading a sonic disruptor for enemy communications into his overstuffed bag when Zaria stopped next to them.

"You know we're not gonna use half of that don't you?"

Tern continued doing what he was doing.

"You never know what we're gonna run into though."

"Yeah, with who we're going up against, I expect a lot of problems to crop up on this job. And not just because we're all emotionally compromised," Jaden said. He stuffed an actual rope in his own bag that already wouldn't close due to the long handle of a metal sledge hammer.

Shaking her head, but not necessarily disagreeing with their assessment, Zaria moved to the left wall and the weapons cache to do her own back-up-plan preparation. She grabbed two 9mm guns and ejected the clips, checking their capacity before slamming them back in. Placing the guns in her waist holsters, she grabbed four extra

clips and put them in her jacket pockets before reaching for the one weapon she never left the ship without.

It was a silver rod that stood, in its inert state, three feet in length and about an inch thick. Pulling it from its place on the wall, Zaria manipulated its form to wrap around her waist a few inches above the holster belt. The small rod could be manipulated into any shape Zaria needed and unlike her snake bracer, was used primarily as a weapon.

The silver metal of her bracer and rod stood out against the black of her shirt, but the jacket covered both nicely when closed. The jacket had a slit in the side for a pocket, but the pocket was missing, providing easy access to the silver rod wrapped around her waist if she needed it.

Zaria's metal manipulation skills were great for small things, but the staff was at about the limit of her power. She couldn't manipulate a surface any bigger. Where full blooded metal spirits could manipulate far greater quantities and meld with the metal itself, Zaria was restricted to small bits of metal that she had to physically touch.

She paused in her thoughts as she remembered the chaos of the metal in her room, but pushed it aside when the implications became too much for her to handle. Best to think about it when she didn't have a job to do.

Despite her limited abilities at metal manipulation, it was all she needed thanks to the training she was forced into under Adarion's rule. She had discovered how to use the skills she had to the best of her advantage during her bouts in the arena and later as



Adarion's bodyguard and assassin. Despite being free of Adarion, she kept in practice by applying these skills during jobs and when she needed to finesse the engines.

Finished loading up with everything she would need, Zaria made her way back to Tern and Jaden. They had somehow managed to get their packs zipped and on their shoulders, a miracle she tried not to think about too hard.

They each had on black clothing streaked with dark brown, the combination a perfect blend with the ground on Ectasia at night. They had more of the brown streaks rubbed on their faces and their blond hair tied back and concealed by the deep hoods of the jackets. The clothing matched Zaria's as well, except for the hood, her black hair less of a beacon than the twins' white blond locks.

"Ready?" Zaria asked.

"And willing," Tern replied. His mood had improved exponentially upon arrival in the Ectasian realm. The prospect of a little revenge able to make him down right jolly.

"And able," Jaden threw in.

Rolling her eyes, Zaria headed to the bay doors and the ramp that led to the ground. Because of the covert status of the job, they would be making their way on foot to the High Councilor's compound. The fighters would get them there quicker, but with the sensors that the compound had, their flight and trajectory would be known well before Zaria and crew would be in visual range.

The three miles from the ship to the compound wouldn't be a bad trek; they would just have to watch out for the native wild life.

Wolves were the biggest threat in terms of outright danger, the average pack consisting of anywhere between fifteen and thirty wolves. Individually they could take down prey twice their size; in a pack, they were almost unstoppable. Fortunately, a show of fire power could slow them down long enough for a hiker to get to a safe place.

The more subtle danger that plagued this realm was the plants Nolen had been so fascinated over. The ectarisc plant was native to Ectasia and spread like wildfire throughout the realm. It had thick razor-like blades of leaves sharp enough to sever bone if provided with enough pressure. The plant was a weed that took over standing vegetation and crawled along the ground, having no particular preference as long as it spread.

In the populated parts of the realm, the plant was kept at bay by burning it down. A solid ring of burnt ground was a common sight around almost all Ectasian cities, towns, and villages. This measure was not provided for the unpopulated parts, the parts that Zaria, Tern and Jaden would be going through tonight.

Zaria grumbled as she remembered Nolen's fascination. She hated this plant with a passion, and if not for the reward in vengeance at the end of this trek, she would seriously consider passing on this job.

She stopped at the ramp and tapped her ear piece. The small communication device buzzed before Nike answered.

"What up, Captain?"

"How's our passenger?" she asked. She had momentarily forgotten their other client in the haze of her anger.

“He’s a little upset about not being able to explore the surroundings, but Mal talked him out of complaining.”

“He growled?”

“Very loudly.” The smile was evident in Nike’s voice.

“Well, we’re headed out. Keep link silence unless this turns into a cluster-fuck. We’ll contact you once we have the artifact and are headed back.” Zaria tapped the ear piece to mute before heading down the ramp, her companions, two tall silent shadows, followed her down and started off at a brisk walk.

Zaria, Tern and Jaden wore specialized contact lenses as they worked their way through the dangerous landscape of the realm. The contact lenses would provide night vision almost as sharp as a shifter’s and allow the wearer to see at night as if it were day. The lenses came in handy while trying to avoid the ectarisc plants.

They made good time on the trek despite getting stopped at several points by impenetrable walls of ectarisc and having to back track until they could find a way around. They arrived on the border of the compound in under an hour and paused to check security.

The compound was a four story mansion that was close to a mile long and a third of a mile wide. From the plans that they had received from the stranger, they knew that there were two levels below ground as well. The size of the compound was impressive, and Zaria would classify it as a palace if not for the plain military décor and style of the building itself. Every part was aimed more for safety and security than aesthetics.

There were windows on every floor that were still lit up, showing activity that continued on even at this late hour. The perimeter wall was patrolled on both sides by rotating groups of human guards sporting rifles and non-human guards carrying no weapons beside the ones they were born with.

The humans were less of a threat than the other species guarding the High Councilor. The rifles, while deadly to all three of the crew now hidden on the ridge that overlooked the compound, didn't hold the same risk as the different species, whose powers couldn't be accounted for. Rifles were predictable. The species? Not so much.

"Since when do supporters of Adarion start employing multiple species? They usually just use the Vlorians that Adarion provides for them." Jaden asked referring to the army that Adarion kept of Vlorians, humanoid soldiers with incredible strength who followed the commands of a single leader, their deity, with unwavering loyalty.

Adarion had defeated the Vlorian King centuries before Zaria's time at his keep and had become the de-facto leader of the species. His control over them is absolute because for all rights and purposes, he is their deity. For Adarion's supporters, both politically and militarily, he provides contingents of Vlorian to play both protectors to the supporters and to serve as a constant reminder that Adarion holds the power in their alliance. Only a few times had a supporter tried to go against Adarion. They had found out quickly that the Vlorian also served as punishers and executioners for Adarion's enemies as well. Being provided with a contingent of Vlorian was both a sign of commitment on Adarion's part and a threat for any likely betrayers.

Zaria agreed with Jaden that the lack of Vlorian at the compound was more than suspicious. She tapped her ear piece. "Nike. The High Councilor's compound is heavily guarded with multiple species, none of them Vlorian."

"Is that bad?" Nike's voice buzzed through the communicator.

"We're not sure, but keep your guard up. Something is off here."

"We still going in?" Tern asked.

"At the moment we have no solid reason not to and a payday that argues to go through with it." Zaria ended communications with Nike, got up from her crouch and started making her way down to the fence. The patrol had moved on and they had only a small opening to get through the fence before the next patrol came through.

Reaching the stone perimeter wall, Jaden and Tern crouched and braced their hands together. Not stopping her jog, Zaria stepped up into the cradle of their hands and was propelled up to the top of the eight foot wall, clinging to its thick top before jumping down to the other side. Jaden then braced for Tern who followed Zaria over the wall. Jaden was the last to come over the wall. Being an air elemental came with its advantages. He was able to control all aspects of the element including pushing himself over the wall by manipulating the wind around him. It also made him an exceptional choice for pilot of their ship.

When Jaden joined Zaria and Tern on the other side of the fence, they all wove their way through the dark expanse of the grounds that led to the compound. Once at the side of the house, Tern took lead. His fire elemental abilities would take care of any electrical security system. At a side door that the plans from the job contract had

showed led to the less used of the two kitchens on the first floor, Tern placed his hand against the security panel and sent a short burst of lightning through the panel. After a few seconds, the lights on the panel went off and Tern stepped back to give access to Zaria.

Zaria used her snake bracer to form a lock pick set. The head to be the torsion wrench and the tail to be the hook pick. Fiddling with the components in the lock for a few seconds, Zaria pulled the torsion wrench and the lock opened easily. The bracer retook its original form and wrapped around her wrist again. Tern and Jaden moved in to flank her as she slowly opened the door. She had faith in Tern's ability to take out the alarm, but it was always a safe bet to be prepared to run if the mark had a backup system.

As the door opened fully and no alarm blared, Zaria breathed a sigh of relief and moved inside. Tern and Jaden quickly followed and closed the door behind them. Leaving Jaden in the kitchen to ensure an escape route, Zaria and Tern made their way through the kitchen and were just leaving when their earpieces began to squeal.

Quickly pulling it out, she held it away from her and tried to muffle the shrill sound from reverberating around the large kitchen. Tern and Jaden followed her lead. Jaden clasp his tightly in his fist while Tern sent another bolt of lightning through his own piece, effectively silencing it forever.

When the noise passed, Tern poked his head out of the kitchen door and into the hallway checking for approaching guards. Jaden went to the window near the door they had just entered doing the same for the guards patrolling the perimeter. Zaria cautiously

raised the piece back up to her ear, worried about the sudden sound and its source, Nike was a wiz at all things electronic and the noise was as far from mission protocol as it could get. She was having a hard time believing it could be a small error on Nike's behalf that made the shrill squeal.

"...Zar!...attack..."

Zaria heard Nike's voice, but couldn't quite comprehend what she was hearing.

"Nike, repeat. Nike I didn't hear you can you repeat?" Zaria whispered. She was ever conscious of the dangerous position she, Tern, and Jaden were still in.

"We're under attack...Mal attempting to hold...overrun...Vlorian!" This was all that came back before the com went to complete static.

Zaria looked up at Jaden across the kitchen and saw that he had received the message as well. She tapped Tern on the shoulder and moved back to Jaden and the outside kitchen door. "Head back. Now."

Tern started to protest, but Jaden stopped him.

"Ambush at the ship."

Zaria reached the door and opened it quickly, not bothering to check through the window in her hurry to reach Nike and Mal. As the door opened, she found herself face to rifle barrel. Zaria started to reach for the rod wrapped around her waist when there was a crash from behind her. Turning her head slightly, she saw the guards pour into the kitchen from the house and prayed that Nike and Mal could handle whatever was happening at the ship. They weren't going to make it back anytime soon.

## Chapter Five

Zaria shared a look with Tern and Jaden before turning back to the human with the rifle barrel pointed at her face. In less time than she would like to think about, the kitchen had filled with over twenty compound guards. The humans present had their weapons pointed at Zaria, Tern and Jaden while the other species were in various postures of aggression. The two Fengolians by the hallway door were shaking out their arms and opening and closing their jaws, their tusks looking particularly sharp to Zaria's eyes. There were at least seven shifters in the room, all of whom had unsheathed their claws, the change rippling under their skin causing a highly disturbing effect that was close to making Zaria sick. She had seen Mal's full change before and wasn't looking forward to seeing another one. The sound of bones popping and shifting filled the overcrowded space of the kitchen.

However, it wasn't the shifters or the Fengolians that worried Zaria all that much. She was more concerned about the ten Heraxuons that accompanied them. Where the shifters and the Fengolians would use brute strength to attempt to overpower Zaria, Tern and Jaden, the Heraxuons were powerful telepaths. Their abilities were unparalleled. It was rumored that a single Heraxuon could decimate an army with just a thought. Zaria had worked plenty of jobs for Heraxuons as a shipper and during her time with Adarion she had been sent to assassinate a few who were business rivals. However, she had never had the misfortune of being on a Heraxuon's bad side. When she assassinated them, she only did so while they were alone and away from their home



realm. She had seen what they could do to a person. What was left behind lived and breathed, but it was a life worse than death.

Zaria was prepared to fight her way out, but not at the cost of a Heraxuon mental attack.

She slowly stepped back from the gun in her face, ever watchful of the people in the room. When her back hit Tern's she stopped and watched as the guards spread throughout the kitchen surrounding their little group.

"Any ideas, Captain?" Jaden asked, joining their circle.

"You didn't happen to bring any mind blockers in that giant pack of yours did you, Tern?" Zaria said. She eyed the silent guards. They hadn't made a move to get closer to them. Zaria figured they must be waiting for further command.

"I didn't think it would be necessary. Who ever heard of a Heraxuon mixing with anyone outside their own realm? How was I supposed to know that they would go even further and be guards for the ruler of another realm completely?" Tern asked. His annoyance at not being one hundred percent prepared coming through in his voice.

"I'm sure they sell their services just like any other species," Jaden replied.

"So, I'm supposed to anticipate the implausible?"

"Why not?"

"Maybe because it's bloody well implausible," Tern snapped. The whispered conversation had been too soft for the humans in the room, but the other species were well equipped to hear the full thing.

Zaria was considering what to do next when the ear bud feed came back on, the voice coming across loud enough for even the humans in the room to hear.

“Zar...overpowe...can’t stop...” Nike’s voice cut off abruptly and a roar could be heard in the background before the feed went dead again.

Tern, Jaden and Zaria all immediately sprang into action, each knowing that the roar they had heard was Mal’s. If Mal had had to shift to defend the ship, then things were worse there than they had at first believed.

Zaria had had her hands up and, with barely a thought, formed her snake bracelet into a throwing knife and sent it at the Heraxuon closest to her on the right. Unfortunately, the shifter to her left had taken the fraction of a second it had taken her to form the knife to close the distance between them and tackled her just before she let the knife go. She watched as the knife found its mark in the Heraxuon, but missed any vital areas, landing almost harmlessly in his upper left shoulder.

Zaria hit the ground hard with the shifter landing solidly on top of her. She immediately reached for the bar around her waist. As her fingers touched the bar, it shifted forms and spikes punctured outward from the bar and into the shifter on top of her. The silver of the spikes caused the shifter to howl and jump up quickly, the holes in his side spilling blood at a steady pace.

Zaria didn’t have time to celebrate her minor victory as the human who had previously been holding the gun to her face brought the same weapon down attempting to use the butt of the rifle to knock her out. She brought her hand up, bringing the bar with her and blocking the gun. After the human lifted the gun, she swept the bar behind

him and slammed it into the back of his knees. As the human took a moment to right himself, Zaria leapt to her feet.

The shifter she had stabbed was still bleeding, but the flow had tapered off to almost nothing. Unfortunately, two other shifters were surrounding her. Hearing the action taking place behind her, she took a quick peak and saw that Tern and Jaden were in similar straits. A Fengolian lay at Tern's feet twitching every few seconds, the lightning running between Tern's fingers making the reason abundantly clear. The other Fengolian was growling and circling Tern, but staying clear of his reach. However, the rest of the humans in the group of guards were now aiming their guns at Tern and he didn't have much room to maneuver.

Jaden had the four other shifters surrounding him. All of them were bleeding superficially from cuts caused by the air Jaden wielded. He had a great reach and could continue cutting them. Unfortunately, the shifters healed amazingly fast as long as it wasn't a wound from silver. Jaden kept cutting as they advanced, but as soon as a blow would land the shifter would back off and another would take their place until the shifter had healed.

Zaria faced her attackers again. Grabbing the bar with both hands, she split the bar in half and formed two swords. The shifters suddenly stopped their circling and the Heraxuons in the room, including the one who still hadn't removed Zaria's knife from his shoulder, stepped forward. She didn't think the shifters had backed off because of her swords and figured they probably didn't want to get caught in the crosshairs as the Heraxuons decided to join the fight.

Futilely hoping to stop any mental attacks that they could throw, Zaria dived at the closest Heraxuon. Before she even made it a foot, there was a sharp pain in her head that stopped her mid-leap. Her swords fell from her hands. As they clattered to the floor, they lost their form and reverted to their original bar shape. Zaria was losing consciousness and with that came the control she had over her metal.

Falling to her knees, Zaria had a brief moment of triumph as the throwing knife embedded in the Heraxuon retook its form of snake band, making a painful furrow in the Heraxuon's shoulder as it broadened and curled in on itself. Him cursing as the female Heraxuon next to him tried to pry the bracer from his shoulder was the last thing she saw before she passed out.

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Mal struggled furiously against his restraints as he tried to reach Nike's prone form. The Vlorians at his shoulder held him back with humiliating ease. The collar they had eventually gotten around his neck was effectively cutting him off from his animal half and depleting his strength. As long as it stayed around his neck, he couldn't use any of his shifter abilities. His beast was going crazy inside his mind, trying to find a way out and to its mate.

When Zaria had radioed in about the strange guards for the High Councilor, Nike, Nolen and Mal had all been on the bridge. The attack on the ship had started when communication between the ship and Zaria suddenly ceased. After shutting down communications, the stone-faced Vlorians had attacked the ship en masse. While Nike

had been able to disrupt the jamming frequency long enough to get a message through, Mal had attempted to keep the Vlorians off the ship and keep Nike relatively safe.

However, the Vlorians were too many and sooner than he would have liked, Mal had been forced to abandon his post at the entrance and retreat to the bridge where Nike was still trying to destroy the jamming frequency. He had killed a good number of them before he had been forced to retreat, but he knew that with the Vlorians, there were always more to take the place of their fallen brethren.

They were like the Hydra of ancient realm myth. You cut one down and two more would sprout up to take its place. The magic used to sustain their life forces was kept by a single leader and without killing the leader the Vlorian would continue to multiply with each death. They were the main reason Adarion had become such a power in the realms.

Mal should've known that attacking an ally of Adarion would offer more consequences than they would have figured.

At the bridge, Mal had been holding the bridge door against the onslaught of Vlorian when he saw Nike go down from a blow to her head.

A blow delivered by Nolen.

While he had gone insane at the sight of his mate harmed and started to shift, the Vlorian behind him had clipped the collar into place, effectively paralyzing him until they had finished shackling his hands behind his back. On his knees, he kept trying to get to Nike with little luck as the room filled almost completely with Vlorian.

Nolen hadn't moved from his position over Nike's form as Mal had been shackled and brought to his knees, but now he made his way over to Mal.

"I really must thank you all for confirming Adarion's suspicions about Ke'Artia. Fain isn't the ally he claims to be."

Mal started cursing at the situation and Nolen. He should have thrown the damn tourist off the ship when he first insulted them.

Mal was pissed with himself for not smelling the deception on Nolen when he first met him. He should have paid more attention to the man than he had. But a ferrying client was the perfect façade. It was someone on the ship, but willingly and studiously avoided.

Now, Nolen stood before Mal with a gloating smirk in place. All Mal wanted to do was smash his smug face in.

Yanking on his bonds and the restraining hands, he raised up from his knees for a few seconds before the Vlorian on his left kicked the back of his knee and he went down again.

"If this was all about the High Councilor then why include us?" Mal asked.

Nolen laughed at the altercation and the question as he moved through the room to stand over Nike.

"Stay the fuck away from her!" Mal yelled, still struggling.

"But she was so kind to me before and you want the answer to your question, right? Besides, I have won the right to the ship and all it holds through my conquest.

Isn't that a part of the shipper code?" Nolen bent down and gently pushed Nike's hair from her face.

Mal watched helpless as Nolen checked her pulse, then stood back up and turned to the Vlorian on his right.

"Pick her up and place her in the chair," Nolen ordered.

"Don't touch her!"

Ignoring Mal's outburst completely, Nolen moved to the pilots chair and sat down. "I am quite impressed with you both at the moment; don't ruin it by being melodramatic. I'm just moving her to the chair so that she can undo the damage she has already wrought."

"What damage?"

"Don't be obtuse. I know she managed to get a message through to Zaria, Jaden and the dense one at the compound despite the jammer that I placed earlier during our discussion on portals. You had best hope for your continued existence that nothing of any import got out. The other half of my mission is to bring back Zaria. Adarion has missed her so and I don't plan on disappointing him." He waved his hand at the Vlorian who had put Nike into her seat in front of the navigations console. "Well, don't just let her sit there. Wake her up! Do I have to spell everything out for you?"

The Vlorian grabbed the front of Nike's shirt and slapped her on the face. Her head spun to the side, but lolled again to her chest. The Vlorian brought his hand back again, but Mal was up on his feet as soon as the first slap had hit and was making his way through the crowd of Vlorian to get at the one holding Nike. Even with his hands

behind his back, he was doing damage to the Vlorian with kicks, bites and pure anger driven power. The Vlorian holding Nike struck her again, this time Nike started coming around. Mal had gotten within a few feet from the Vlorian hurting his mate when he was tackled to the ground by three other Vlorians. He continued to shout and bite his way from the bunch, but was pressed firmly into the ground. With the collar still in place, he had no real hope of getting the Vlorians off.

"Mal?" Nike was groggy, but the stinging in her cheek was clearing her mind of the cobwebs pretty quickly.

"I'm here, baby." Mal responded before his face was pushed back into the ground and conversation became impossible.

Nike took in her surroundings, not particularly liking what she saw. The Vlorians were everywhere on the bridge and Mal was pressed to the floor with five Vlorians atop of him. She noticed the collar around his neck and was instantly furious. Mal hated those damn things. She knew that the collaring was driving him and his beast nuts and her being in danger wasn't helping anything. She started looking for any way out of this situation.

"Ah, she awakens," Nolen commented. She had just noticed him sitting in the pilot's chair.

"Son of a fucking Fengolian bitch," Nike spat. She started to get up from her seat, but was pushed back down by the Vlorian she assumed had been hitting her moments before.

"Now that's no way for a proper lady to speak," Nolen chastised.

“What happened to the ignorant moron who’d never been outside Fengolia?”

she asked.

“An act, my dear. I had to gain your trust somehow and playing stupid seemed the best course.”

Nike refused to respond and instead took stock of the situation. She had gotten a message to Zaria, Tern and Jaden before she had been knocked out. If they were still unknown at the compound, then they should be back to the ship within the hour. Her best bet was to stall Nolen and his men and hope that Zaria and the others could get here in time.

“Why did you need to be on our ship?” she finally asked. She hoped she could keep him talking. Plus, the answer would be nice to have.

“Two reasons really. Like I told your mate earlier, I had to confirm that Fain was less than legitimate in his attestation of allegiance. He had no Vlorians at his compound. Thanks for verifying that by the way.

For the second, all three of them should really have known they couldn’t just leave and he would let them be, especially her. She knew he never willingly gave up what was his,” Nolen vaguely stated. “It will be great fun bringing her back and watching the master punish her for ever leaving him.” The idea seemed to make the smug bastard happier than he already was.

“They? This is all about Adarion?”

“Ding ding ding. I think the little human has gotten it.” Nolen laughed and spun the pilots chair around. Nike was starting to question his sanity, not sure if his insanity

was a help or a hindrance to Mal and her at the moment. She also wondered how they all could have missed this fact as he rode with them through two realms. Surely, if he was this crazy now then their time with him on the ship should have at least given a clue of it.

Mal could hear the conversation going on between Nolen and Nike, but most of his concentration was on trying to get free of the Vlorian. He could probably shake the two Vlorians sitting on his legs, but he didn't have any way to purchase his weight to get rid of the three on his torso and head. He had to accept that he was stuck in place until they tried to move him.

"Now, let's get down to business, shall we?" Nolen stood up and made his way to where Nike was seated. "I need you to be so kind as to tell me what you managed to get through to your associates at the compound before we stopped you."

"Not likely, but thanks for asking," Nike stated.

"Now, you don't want to make me mad. I tend to get carried away when I'm mad. I would hate to do something unalterable that could be very bad for you and yours." Nolen walked slowly behind Nike.

"Your insanity hardly scares me. And I refuse to give my friends away."

Nolen strolled casually over to where Mal was pinned to the floor.

"Have it your way." He pulled a long dagger from his belt and before Nike could say anything, he had plunged the dagger through Mal's thigh.

Mal roared at the pain and thrashed around more on the floor. Nike screamed as the dagger went into Mal. She knew that the wound wouldn't kill him, but that hardly

mattered to her. She leapt from her chair and used a combination jab to the closest Vlorian's nerve bundle, located at the base of its neck, to freeze it in place. Grabbing the sword from the frozen Vlorian's belt she lunged for Nolen, who had just yanked the dagger from Mal's thigh, causing him to roar again.

She made it to within a foot of the stranger before two Vlorian grabbed her, one with an arm around her waist and the other grabbing her arms and ripping the sword from her grasp. She kicked out with her feet, striking Nolen in the face. As he stumbled back, she had a moment to feel a sense of victory before the Vlorian holding her waist increased the pressure and she ceased being able to breathe all that well.

"How did one little human get the drop on you!" Nolen shrieked, holding his broken nose and storming over to the still frozen Vlorian. Reaching him, Nolen plunged the dagger into his arm over and over again before pushing him to the ground. "Can none of you do anything right!" He yelled again, walking back over to where Mal and Nike were restrained.

"Stand the beast up." He ordered, drawing to a stop in front of Nike. "Did you like the way the dagger entered him so easily? Maybe you missed it? Let me show you again."

Turning around he stabbed the dagger into Mal's shoulder. "How 'bout now? Did you get a good look this time?" He yanked the dagger out and faced Nike again.

Mal had only gritted his teeth at the second stab, having seen it coming and expecting the pain that accompanied it. Nike, however, couldn't stand seeing Mal hurt like this.

"You Heraxuon scum sucking shit. I will kill you for this," she said.

"It can all end if you tell me what the message was."

Nike glared at the stranger, not saying anything.

"Alright, maybe I haven't been making the right sort of cuts." He walked casually around Mal. "Let's see how long you can watch as I carve your beast up."

Chapter Six

Fain heard the alarm sound and shot out of the seat behind his desk. The late hour had barely registered to him. He made his way around his desk and toward his office door just as Ryder calmly opened the door and entered. The shifter had a grim look on his face. He was tall for a shifter topping off a 6'10" where the average height was somewhere around 6'5". Fain was again glad that this behemoth was on his side.

Following closely behind Ryder was Synna the Heraxuon commander. She had the long white hair that was a trademark for her species. Dressed all in black, the contrast was almost ghastly, but she somehow made it work. She barely reached Ryder's chest, but her mental powers were rumored to be the strongest her race had ever seen.

"What is it?" Fain asked, hurrying to them.

"Intruders, we don't know their agenda as of yet, but we have guards en route to capture them," Ryder responded. The shifter never really got too excited over anything.

"Just intruders then? Or are we talking full assault?" Fain asked. He moved past Ryder and Synna and entered the hallway.

"We have just found three intruders. I have my people searching their minds to see if there are more coming," Synna responded. She moved up to walk beside him on his left.

"I have our guards reinforcing the perimeter now," Ryder responded.

"How far inside our perimeter are they?" Fain asked. He was a little alarmed that they were inside at all. He had trained beside most of his guard for the past five years and knew that they all were exceptional at their jobs. The idea that anyone could breach their perimeter was beyond galling.

"They breached the building itself," Ryder admitted. He looked ashamed, as if the intruder's infiltration was a direct affront to his honor.

"Inside the building," Fain asked incredulously. "Where?"

"It looks like they got into the kitchen."

"How did they get that far when we were aware of their presence?" Fain asked.

"We didn't know they had breached until they set off a noise in the kitchen itself," Synna said. She looked no happier about the situation than Ryder did.

"And none of your people felt anything at all while intruders were sneaking in to my compound?" Fain waved his hand around his head as he asked the question, even after five years working beside Synna and her people, he wasn't really sure how the Heraxuon's did what they did.

"It doesn't work that way and you know it. We have to be specifically searching for a certain person, someone who is not supposed to be there. And even with this sort of concentration, we would be assaulted by the thoughts and emotions of every non-

Heraxuon on the compound. Wading through all of that would be too taxing on any Heraxuon no matter the strength they had." Synna finished on a huff of breath that signaled her anger more than the words themselves had. Fain immediately felt like shit for accusing the Heraxuons.

"I'm sorry. I know you can't, I'm just pissed that someone was able to get inside the house without tripping any triggers at all. From what I understand, we wouldn't even know they were here if it hadn't been for an alarm they set off." They reached the end of the hallway and turned right. The next hallway extended the full length of the house with windows on the left side and doorways on the right. Stepping up to the second door down, Fain pulled the door open to find the conference room already buzzing with activity.

The humans in his employ were at the computers in the rear of the room, working through footage, trying to find the hole in their security that the intruders were able to get through. Several shifters and elementals surrounded the conference table in the middle of the room perpendicular with the door, looking at the digital map splayed across the table of the compound and checking in with patrols and guards that surrounded the perimeter.

The Fengolian leader was standing next to the door in deep conversation with a Bedixan elemental. No Heraxuons were in attendance and Fain assumed they had all been deployed to handle the intruders once the other guards had subdued them.

"What do we know so far?" Fain asked, going to stand at the head of the conference table.

"We have them cornered in the kitchen. We've identified them as two elementals and a human," a shifter at the table replied.

"Any idea how they got in?"

"I think I can answer that," a human at the computers said, raising her hand like an obedient school child.

Fain waited for her to say more before adding, "And that answer would be?"

"Oh! Yes, here." She uploaded a video to the main screen on the left wall of the room, directly in front of where Fain was standing.

Fain and the others in the room watched as the patrol passed the outside wall. Three seconds later, Fain saw movement on the bottom right side of the screen. He let out an appreciative grunt as he watched the three intruders scale the wall with no difficulty, the last one practically soaring over the whole damn wall. From there, the feed switched to a camera on the wall itself. He barely saw the shadows of the intruders make their way to the kitchen door. They were in through his heavily secured door in the next moment.

"Well that was humiliatingly easy," Fain responded. He was angry that the intruders were able to get into the compound so quickly, but he also had to admit that they were quite the team. There was no hesitation or misstep about them. Each move they made was precise and calculated.

"Why didn't we catch this immediately as they vaulted over the wall?"

"This feed isn't on the main security line. The outside feed was set up to monitor the growth of the ectarisc plant and send a signal when it got too close to the outer

wall. The feed is only checked twice a week.” The human woman responded. “The inner feed is an old angle that we adjusted when we switched the security last month. The only reason it was even still active was because we had forgotten about it. We had monitored the main security feed and found nothing before turning to non-monitored feeds. On a brighter note, we’ve discovered that our new security system has a lag in video and are now fixing it.” She supplied cheerfully.

“We just got confirmation of their capture,” Ryder said. His hand went to his ear and the ear piece that was within. “All three are out and being secured as we speak.”

“I have the same information,” Synna replied, not needing the ear piece that Ryder had. “I will have my people start to interrogate them immediately. We should have answers for you shortly.”

“Wait. I want to see these intruders for myself before we go any further. They may be agents from Adarion,” Fain said, already heading for the door.

“They have been moved to the prison by the north wall,” the Fengolian leader stated.

“I want everyone to stay on high alert until we find out how many to expect.” Fain left the room, trailing Ryder, Synna and the Fengolian leader, whose call name was Lyle. His name in his native tongue was unpronounceable by anyone outside his own species.

They left out of the front door and traversed the lawn between the main building and the prison house at the north-west corner of the compound. They made it through the door and were half way through the main room and the guard sleeping quarters

before they started to hear the cursing coming from below them. They reached the door that led down to the basement level and arrived in the prison and interrogation rooms.

Fain was immediately drawn to the large fire elemental cursing at his guards. He was almost as tall as Ryder and even restrained to a chair his presence was just as intimidating. Fain took a moment to take in the glaring, silent air elemental tied up to the chair on the fire elemental's right and the human female restrained on his left. The female's head was down and her eyes closed. Fain couldn't make out any features because of the black and brown paint on their faces.

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Zaria came awake to Tern cursing. She assumed it was at the guards and not her, but didn't want to raise her head to find out just yet. Her head ached so badly at the moment she thought she would throw up if it didn't ease in the next minute or so. The mental probes of the Heraxuon left one hell of a punch to the brain. She knew that they had tried to get into her brain and access her memories. Fortunately, as one of the single advantages to having been an assassin for Adarion, she had a mental blocker that resisted Heraxuon mind infiltration implanted in her head. This blocker didn't extend to the basic bodily functions, such as limb movement, that the Heraxuon could affect, but as long as the device stayed in place, she didn't have to worry about them accessing her memories or thoughts.

Tern and Jaden were another story, however. They didn't have the blocker and were defenseless to the mind probes. She figured that fact, plus the pain of the probe, was the main reason for Tern's cursing. By now, Ke'Artia's men probably knew more

than she would have ever willingly told them and it didn't sit any better with her than it did with Tern.

As the ache began to back off, Zaria started to take note of her surroundings. She could tell from the coarse feeling and the pain in her shoulders that her arms were tied behind her. Her legs were restrained to the chair.

She kept her eyes mostly closed and looked out through her lashes, not wanting the guards to realize that she was awake just yet. She saw an entrance directly in front of her and three blurry shapes she assumed were guards standing by the door itself. She didn't want to risk turning her head, but the direction of Tern's curses made her think there were other guards behind her as well.

The room itself was just as cold and damp as the cell that Teyla and she had shared all those years ago, just slightly larger and cleaner. Being bound in this room brought back more memories, memories that she couldn't afford to wallow in. So, she pushed them back and concentrated on the problem at hand.

Wondering if the head honcho had shown up yet, she decided to open her eyes fully.

She was just getting ready to lift her head, figuring there was no real advantage to pretending to still be passed out, when the door opened and other figures walked in. She immediately closed her eyes again.

"The great and powerful Ke'Artia deigns to grace us with his presence. I'm touched," Tern said, never one to be silent when he could be a sarcastic ass instead. Jaden was the talkative one in any social setting, while Tern just sort of stood in the

background being intimidating, but throw the twins into any dangerous situation and their personalities seemed to switch completely.

“Well, you at least know who I am. That narrows down the reason for you being here from a few million to only a few thousand.” Zaria went completely stiff at the sound of Fain’s voice. “I think we’re making some solid progress and I haven’t even had to resort to violence yet.”

She had known that running into him on this job was a possibility. She had attempted to prepare mentally for the possible meeting, but the actual thing was more difficult than she had expected. She was suddenly back at Adarion’s side; the threat to everyone she loved enough to keep her from killing Adarion and the aristocracy that accompanied him. She remembered watching as they laughed at the arena fights, the desperate attempts by the slaves fighting to live one more day, completely inconsequential to the self-involved elite.

“No violence? My pounding head would like to argue with that statement. Have you ever felt a Heraxuon mind probe?” Tern asked.

Zaria shook herself mentally and chastised herself for being pulled out of the here and now. She needed to take in every detail in order to come up with an appropriate escape plan. Relaxing her muscles one at a time, she slowly lost the stiffness in her shoulders and resumed her passed out appearance.

“You intruded on my property, a Heraxuon mind probe is the least of what you deserve,” Fain stated calmly. Zaria watched as Fain dragged another chair from the corner of the room and positioned it in front of Tern before sitting down. “Now that we

have the pleasantries out of the way, how about you tell me your name or possibly the reason as to why you are in my compound to begin with?"

"After the probe, you already know the reason and my name. You probably know every name of every member of my family as well."

"That is true, Tern." Zaria was finally able to make out the female Heraxuon dressed in black, who had spoken from the back of the room. The Heraxuon moved from the doorway where she had been standing next to a tall shifter and a Fengolian. They must be the leaders of the specific species. They had come with Fain and it was only logical that they would be the heads of their sects.

"We know that you were here to complete a job for a complete stranger who was going to pay you double your going rate. We also know that after finding out that the target was Fain, you willingly accepted the job." The Heraxuon leader had moved to stand just behind Fain. "We know that Jaden is your twin and pilot of your ship, while the female's name is Zaria and she is your captain. We know that there are two more of your crew waiting at the ship, a shifter, Mal, and his mate, a low level human witch, Nike. Also a client you're ferrying to Milona, Nolen. We have already dispatched a squadron to watch them and your ship."

"The issue here is that if you had admitted yourself why you were here, we would have become less suspicious. Instead, simply curious," Fain stated.

Tern yanked on his bonds and glared at Fain. "You act pretty tough when you have a whole squadron behind you. Then again, that is how you like to travel, well protected and with several people to die before you. But let me lose and see who ends

up sorry for it.” Tern smirked at this. “Mal will eat your little squadron alive. They won’t have a chance of capturing anyone aboard our ship.”

“Their orders are to watch only. We know the foolishness of getting between a shifter and his mate and we won’t be making that mistake. We’ll simply hold you here until we have all of the information we need, if that includes telling them that you are hostages and they need to supply us with the information we need, then so be it.”

“Bullshit, you degenerate Ectasian filth. We heard your forces attacking our ship before you ever came to get us in that damn kitchen.”

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Fain was taken aback by this and he immediately stood up. Sharing a glance with Ryder and Synna, they all headed to the next room, leaving their prisoners to stew. When they reached the room, Lyle shut the door behind them.

“What are they talking about?” Fain asked.

“We didn’t even know about them until after the noise in the kitchen and we never had any patrols in the outlying area,” Ryder replied, starting to pace. His beast was probably agitated and pacing would help him keep his cool.

“Synna, how close are our people to their ship?”

“They should be there within five minutes. I have one of my people with them. We should know what’s going on immediately upon their arrival.”

“Good. What else do we know about this job that they were hired to do?”

“So far, we were just able to get a few details. What I told Tern was about as much as we know. We could do a deeper probe, but I can’t assure their full recuperation

from it. It would be best if we could get them to admit to more of the plan.” Synna never seemed to show much emotion and she didn’t look like the pain a further probe would cause to their prisoners was bothering her all that much.

While Ryder intentionally kept his emotions in check to prevent an unprovoked shift, Synna didn’t realize when she was being emotionless. As a species, the Heraxuons had difficulty with outward signs of emotion because they could understand emotion at its core. On such a personal level, outward signs cease to matter. Synna often forgets that the other species can’t sense her emotions like she can sense theirs.

“From what we know, we think they came for an artifact that you supposedly stole. Don’t know why they think it other than this client told them so,” Ryder responded.

“The client doesn’t look familiar to me or any of my people. I had one of my people draw his image from Tern’s memory; they are circulating it as we speak.” Synna used her link to pull up a sketch of the client who ordered the job, then passed the link to Fain.

Fain took the link and stared at the image presented. The man looking out at him wasn’t familiar exactly, but he did look like someone he knew from Adarion’s association. “Ryder, does this look like Luca to you?” He handed the link to Ryder.

Ryder looked at the image for a few seconds before shaking his head. “It is vaguely similar, but I don’t believe it to be him. I would suggest that we take precautions all the same. Do you think Adarion knows?”

"I hope not, but I think it would be best to proceed under the inclination that he does. Let's see what else we can get from our prisoners." Fain started back for the door that led to where the prisoners were. He turned back toward Synna. "If they don't offer the information freely, I'm giving you the okay to probe further."

Chapter Seven

Zaria was starting to get tired of playing the sleeping game. She wasn't sure where Fain and the others had gone and didn't want to raise her head to find out. But not knowing where Fain was was beginning to drive her crazy. Being vulnerable to him was something she never wanted to be again and here she was tied to a chair.

The only thing that was keeping her sane was the fact that the morons had tied her to a metal chair. They had made sure that her hands weren't bound by metal, but they had apparently blanked on the chair itself. They knew that she could shape silver, maybe they thought that was all she could do. The chair was made of regular steel and for most prisoners, was a better fit for keeping them bound than a wood chair would have.

Tern, for example, could burn a wood chair fairly quickly with no damage to himself. The steel, on the other hand, wouldn't melt quickly or effectively. Mal could probably rip a wood chair apart with ease. Metal just worked better for most of the species.

Zaria could only assume that they didn't get many metal spirits here. Her species was fairly rare and agoraphobic. She was the only metal spirit she knew of that lived

outside of Ryndok. They didn't bother themselves with anything having to do with politics or problems of the other realms. It was understandable that Fain and his forces weren't equipped to handle a metal spirit.

Zaria had managed to get her hands wrapped around the back bars of her chair without anyone noticing. She was just about to take advantage of Fain's disappearance when the door opened back up and Fain and his commanders came back into the room.

"The person who hired you," Fain moved back to the chair in front of Tern, "what do you know about him?"

"He pays really well," Tern stated. Zaria could practically hear him rolling his eyes at the question.

"This artifact you were paid to find, I've never even seen it. That tells me that either this client lied to you or you managed to trick the Heraxuons who probed your mind into believing a false reason for your presence here."

"Yeah, because giving false information about why we're here, but providing our names and the location of our ship sounds like a master plan to me. Jaden, I must be smarter than you thought, huh?"

"Confirming their suspicions just now was a real genius move," Jaden spoke for the first time since they had been captured.

"Like they didn't already know."

Zaria shook her head as Jaden and Tern started to bicker about the validity of confirming information. She knew that they were still well aware of the situation, but siblings apparently could use any situation as a good time to air out their grievances

with each other. Teyla and she had done it plenty of times for Zaria to know this as truth.

“Hardly, but please, don’t let me stop you. Continue your conversation with the man who has us tied to chairs.”

“Boys, if we could bring this back to the problem at hand that would be great,” Fain said. He successfully broke up the verbal fight that was sure to follow. There would have been cursing and name calling and Zaria didn’t think it would do anything to help their situation, other than possibly causing a distraction for her to get free.

“I know that the client lied to you, because the Heraxuons don’t make mistakes. And on top of that, we didn’t attack your ship. We didn’t even know you were on the property until you set off the sound in the kitchen.”

“And we’re just supposed to believe that you have nothing to do with the attack on our ship?” Tern sneered. “We got the message. Nike clearly stated that there were Vlorian that attacked our ship. We thought it was strange that you didn’t have any patrolling your perimeter, but I guess we know now why that was. You sent them to ambush us at the ship.”

“What do you expect from a supporter of Adarion?” Jaden asked.

Zaria watched as Fain shared a look with the shifter behind him before turning back to Tern. She wasn’t sure what she was seeing in Fain’s face, but she didn’t like it. He looked almost affronted that Jaden had called him an Adarion supporter. She didn’t know if it was a lie, but why try to convince them that he wasn’t? They had all seen him

at the arena bouts. He was a known supporter. And what did lying about that support gain them that they didn't already have?

"I can't discuss the last part, but I assure you that no Vlorian works under the pretense of my orders. If your ship was attacked by Vlorians it wasn't from an order that I gave."

He seemed almost honest in his statement, but Zaria knew from experience that he talked a good game, but rarely followed through. She still remembered the only time they had previously shared words and his false promise of freedom. She wouldn't be as naive this time.

"We don't believe you and I doubt you can convince us. We've seen you plenty of times in the company of Adarion. If there are any Vlorian here, they are certainly here on his order to aid you," Jaden stated calmly.

"You were tricked, or double crossed at the least, by the stranger that hired you. We can move past this, try to work together for a common goal. Your people are in danger. I have a squadron nearby; I can order them to help. We don't need to be enemies." Fain leaned forward in his chair.

Zaria couldn't have held back the disbelieving scoff that escaped her mouth if she had wanted to. Slowly, she raised her head and faced Fain. "Don't need to be enemies? I'm afraid you are severely mistaken."

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Fain turned his head to take in the female that sat on the left of the fire elemental, Tern. When she had spoken, he was a little shocked to find that she was

awake at all. He knew that the Heraxuon mind probe could affect a human ten times worse than any of the other species. Fain's species of shifter could shake off the effects of the probe in only a few minutes once the probe was finished.

From what his guards had told him on the way here, he knew that she was a human with a talent for forming silver. Silver Shapers were a dangerous sect of humans, but when separated from any source of silver, they were as helpless as the rest of their human population.

He watched as she raised her head. He took in her delicate jaw line and small strait nose, but skin color and any other features still escaped him. He looked instead to her eyes. They were the most interesting shade silver with swirls of stone grey and gold. He had only seen eyes like these once before.

"The assassin..." He had barely gotten the words out and backed away before she had her hands free and was up from her own chair. The chair itself was mangled, chunks missing from the back and seat area. The pieces she had taken from the chair she threw at the two guards behind her before diving for the chairs beside her. She had just gotten her hands on Tern's shackles when her body froze in place, Synna having put a stop to her escape.

The whole altercation had taken less than a second, but two of his guards were on the floor with pieces of chair sticking out of them. He didn't think the injuries were life threatening, but the two Fengolians would be pissed about it and out of commission for the next few hours.

Synna kept her hold on Zaria, while Ryder and Lyle moved in to restrain her again. As Lyle got close to where Zaria stood behind Tern's chair, Tern sent a little lightning through his shackled hands and into Lyle, dropping the big Fengolian.

Ryder hit Tern in the back of the head before moving Zaria to the only wood chair in the room, the one that Fain had been sitting in. While Ryder tied her up with rope, Fain tried to understand why she was here at all. Was this a failed assassination attempt by Adarion? Synna had warned him about Zaria having blocked their probe, but he had never considered it to be of too much importance.

He remembered the rumors that she had left Adarion a little over eight years ago, but he had never been able to confirm that rumor and had always suspected that Adarion started it just to make his allies feel more at ease. Without his assassin around, his power didn't seem as absolute. There wasn't the fear of a silent visit looming over all of their heads.

Then again, he wouldn't have been surprised if she had left of her own volition. The way he treated her was deplorable. Fain had just never thought that she would willingly disobey him.

Once Zaria was completely secure again, Fain addressed Ryder. "How did no one know that she was Adarion's assassin?"

"We had no idea that she was a metal spirit. We thought that she was a silver shaper at best," Ryder responded. He moved to stand at the back of Zaria's chair. He would be prepared if she got free again.

"None of my people saw much when we looked through her mind. Since we did her last, it was assumed that she didn't have anything to add to the information that we had gathered from the other two. We didn't look much deeper than the surface," Synna admitted. She moved to stand with Fain in front of the three prisoners, the chair that Zaria mangled having been moved and replaced with Fain's wooden chair.

The guards that Zaria had wounded were standing up. The pieces of chair that Zaria had embedded in them were now removed. They left the room through the door that led upstairs to receive medical treatment; they're replacements already on their way down.

"Is she secure now?" Fain asked Ryder. When he nodded his head, Fain looked to Synna. "Give back control of her body."

Synna released Zaria and in the next second Zaria was cursing Synna and her entire race quite completely and foully. Fain was impressed with some of the combinations she supplied, but this wasn't getting anybody anywhere.

"Enough," he said. "Are you here to kill me? Did Adarion send you?"

~\*~\*~\*~

Zaria was really getting pissed about being moved around against her will. Heraxuon mind manipulation was going to the top of her list of annoyances. Even Strendle tentacles couldn't amount to the frustration and utter helplessness she felt when a Heraxuon stopped her movements. Glaring at Synna, she answered Fain.

"Am I here to kill you? No. Did Adarion send me? No. Would I really like to kill you?" She turned to look directly at Fain. "Absolutely."

"If Adarion didn't send you, then why are you here?"

"You already know that. I took a job."

"You knew who the target was. Why take the job?"

"Any chance to hurt you was a good enough reason for me."

Jaden took the opportunity of Fain's silence to jump into the conversation.

"Alright," he said, trying his best to sound like a mediator. "So, this has all just been a misunderstanding. How about you let us go? We need to get to our crew mates and being imprisoned here isn't helping anyone. You have all of the information that you need to figure out who hired us from the probes."

Zaria agreed with Jaden's assessment, but she didn't want to leave now, at least not while Fain still breathed. But the reminder that Mal, Nike and Nolen were still in danger was enough to get her back on track. They had to get free so they could check on them. "I promise not to attack you or any of yours if you let us go to our friends." She stated, the words tasting foul in her mouth.

"If you're not working for Adarion, maybe we could make a deal. I already have men stationed near your ship. With a single order they can go in and protect your friends from whoever is attacking them."

Zaria let out a frustrated breath. She should have known it wouldn't be that easy to leave.

~\*~\*~\*~

Nike watched as Nolen pulled the dagger from Mal for the eleventh time. She knew shifter healing would make most of the wounds superficial, but with the collar on

Mal's neck, the healing would be slow, almost human like. If he was stabbed anymore, he was in danger of bleeding out before any healing could occur. After the seventh time, Mal had stopped putting up much of a fight. And now, the only reason he was still on his feet was because of the two Vlorian holding him up by his shoulders.

"You know, I don't think you're getting the point of this interrogation. You see, I stab him, you tell me valuable information, and I stop. It's a fairly simple technique. Why are you not getting it?" Nolen twirled the dagger, flinging drops of Mal's blood in the process. He paced between her and Mal as he talked. "Maybe I just haven't been stabbing in the right areas?"

Nike held her breath as he walked back to Mal.

"Unshackle his hands and hold one out for me," he ordered the Vlorian holding him. He turned back to Nike. "I know what you're thinking." He adopted a high pitch voice. "He can heal from the stabbings, I must protect my friends." He switched back to his regular voice. "But can he regenerate a hand?"

As the Vlorian unbound Mal and pulled his hand out, he struggled feebly, but he had lost too much blood already. He didn't have the energy to fight harder. Nolen moved back to Mal and grabbed a sword from one of the Vlorian before looking back at Nike. "Last chance."

Nike knew that under normal circumstances Mal could regrow his hand, but the blood loss of losing a limb would be too much. "Fine. I'll tell you, just stop hurting him."

"Nike..." Mal got out weakly.

"No, I won't watch you die." She turned to the stranger. "I'll bring up the full conversation, but nothing else happens to him."

Nolen tossed the sword back to the Vlorian he had taken it from and walked over to the computer console. "Bring her over here. Come on now, chop chop."

As Nike was being carried over to the computers, having never been let go from the Vlorian, a new Vlorian came through the bridge door and approached Nolen. "Scouts are reporting that a contingent of the compound guards are almost to this ship."

"Heraxuon scum sucker." Nolen stormed around the bridge, acting a little more psychotic than he had earlier. "Fine. Isn't this just a wonderful predicament?" He swung around and approached Nike again. "If I can't have the main prize, might as well take home the consolation prizes."

He stomped to the door shouting orders behind him. "Looks like we're leaving early boys. Bring the beast and his mate. We've got the information we were commissioned to recover and the rest of the plan is now a lost cause. Let's see if these two will appease Adarion's wrath."

Nike shared a look with Mal as they were dragged from the ship. She didn't think there was any way out of the situation. She could only hope that the rest of the crew survived to come for them.

~\*~\*~\*~

Zaria was about to curse Fain for his manipulative ways when the shifter behind her spoke.



"The attackers from their ship have left. We pursued them to their own ship, but they were able to get away."

"What about Mal, Nike and Nolen?" Zaria asked, panic setting in.

"We weren't able to stop many of them. The Vlorian have never responded well to the mind manipulation of the Heraxuon," the female Heraxuon dressed all in black said.

"Did they capture any of them?" Fain asked her.

"There were only two of my people there. We would have needed to all be there for us to successfully keep one frozen and alive," she replied simply.

"What about Mal, Nike and Nolen?" Zaria asked again.

"There were a few casualties on both sides," the shifter added, ignoring her statement once again.

"How many did we lose?" Fain asked.

"Two of the human scouts. They were caught out in the open when the Vlorian came out of the ship. They must have had advance scouts watching the surrounding area and seen us coming. The rest of the squad was able to take out a few of the Vlorian before they got to their ship."

Zaria looked to Jaden, pissed at no one answering her questions and worried for her friends.

"Pull the squad back in..." Fain was interrupted by a gust of wind through the room that knocked most of the people, not sitting down, a few steps back.

“What. About. Mal. Nike. And. Nolen?” Zaria demanded. She barely kept a growl from surfacing.

Fain looked at the shifter and the female Heraxuon. They each looked like they didn’t want to respond. Finally, the Heraxuon turned to Zaria and looked her in the eyes.

“They were taken with the Vlorian,” she said simply. “But the one you call Nolen looked to be in control of the Vlorians.

Zaria felt the breath leave her as she heard the words. The bet and the fight, the extra side job, it had all been a set up. Krigg had to have been in on it. As much as she wished that this could fall on Fain’s head, she felt solely responsible for what was happening to Mal and Nike. She had known that Adarion would continue to look for her, but she had allowed herself to become complacent, assured of her new place in the world as an independent shipper.

“Let us go. Now.”

~\*~\*~\*~

Fain felt sorry for Zaria and her crew members that were even now headed to Adarion’s keep on Quillaxia, but he needed to think of his people. All of the work he had to do in order to bring these species together against Adarion. He couldn’t just let Zaria and her crew mates leave when he could use this situation to the advantage of the rebellion.

“I will let you go,” he said quickly. He knew that he had very little time to make a deal with them before any benefit of a deal ceased to exist. “But you have to hear me out first.”

"I said, let us go," Zaria demanded.

"You're going after them right? When we let you go, you're going after them?

What if you could have help?"

Fain could tell that this wasn't sitting well with Zaria or her crew and he wanted to get his full proposal out before they could say no.

"I would send men with you in order to intercept the Vlorian before they get back to their master. They have to get across the realm and to the Heraxuon portal and then through Heraxuon to the Quillaxia realm. We have the resources to stop them. In return, I would ask that you join our forces. You have insider knowledge of Adarion. Knowledge that could be vital in our battle."

"I won't ever be a tool for anyone else again," Zaria practically growled. Tern and Jaden struggled in their bonds again, but they looked more willing to accept his deal than Zaria.

"No, it would be a partnership, nothing more."

"I've seen you with Adarion. I will never be associated with him or anyone who serves him again. You can take your deal and shove it."

"I'm not associated with him like you think. I can promise you this."

"And I should believe you over my own memory? I think not. Now, let us go."

"I'm telling you the truth. You've heard of the rebellion that Adarion is fighting?"

Fain waited a moment for Zaria to nod her head before continuing. "I'm the rebel leader. Why do you think I have so many different species here?"

Fain watched the emotion play across Zaria's painted face. He could tell she was contemplating her choices.

"I don't care about your disagreement with Adarion, but if I have to join it in order to get my friends back, I will." Fain started to sigh with relief until she added, "But, remember this, I don't forget things and you forcing a deal on us while our friends are being taken away for torture and gods know what else, is one that I will be sure to remember."

Fain knew this relationship would be tenuous at best, but he'd take the win.

"Release them," he ordered. "Synna, get the trajectory on the Vlorian's vessel."

Fain looked back to Zaria, "We have a ship to catch."

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